

# DE

## MOTIVATIONAL TRAINING



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# Demotivational Training

(Éloge de la Démotivation)

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translated by Vincent Stone

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Cruel Hospice is a place where a terminally-ill society gets the nasty treatment it deserves. Anyone trying to resuscitate the near dead is a legitimate target for criticism.

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To Renate, for so many motives

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# I WHY DO SOMETHING RATHER THAN NOTHING?

*Motivated, motivated,  
We must be motivated.*

—Neo-Trotskyist refrain

To get a donkey to move forward, nothing is better than the proverbial carrot and stick. At least that's how the story goes. Having known a few muleskinners myself, I never saw a single one resort to this technique. But whatever the reality may be, it's a useful metaphor that, like many popular expressions, contains and condenses phenomena that are more complex than they seem. From the outset, let's be clear that it is a question of the carrot *and* the stick, and not one or the other. There's not an option, but rather a dialectical relation between the two terms. No carrot without the stick, and vice versa. The stick alone, physical punishment without the carrot, is not enough to encourage continuous and resolute forward progress in the animal. The beaten mule will snort, reluctantly take a few steps, but then stop moving at the first opportunity. To use managerial language: stick beatings are not *efficient*. In fact, the real effect of the stick is indirect—a permanent threat that can be unleashed at the least sign of diminished effort. It is enough that the donkey realizes that he can be hit, either because he has a painful memory of the experience or because he sees mules around him being hit. It gets him to move, not to reach a goal, but to avoid pain. Specialists describe this phenomenon as a “second-



ary negative motivation.” In the ideal situation, it shouldn’t even be necessary to hit the animal, because he has completely internalized the threat. His “interior stick” will seem like an improvement on the condition of mules. He will say: “We have nothing to complain about. Previously we were beaten cruelly. Now our life is nicer.” The philosopher Norbert Elias called this tendency *the process of the civilization of manners*. Nonetheless, all teachers are well aware that every punishment has to be paired with the promise of a reward. Coercion without reward won’t work for long. One isn’t motivated solely by avoiding something, but by that plus attaining gratification.

Here’s where the carrot comes in, as somebody dangles it from a stick in front of the animal’s nose. If the psychological forces unleashed by the shaking of the stick are relatively crude, those that are unleashed by the carrot are more complex. First, the animal not only has to see the carrot, but must see only that; so it must be arranged that all other objects disappear from his sight. To achieve this effect trainers have, from time immemorial, used *blinders*. Depending on the sophistication of the donkey, there are various types. For example, some let in light from a specific direction, leaving everything else in shadow so as not to distract the donkey from his goal. Anything that is not the carrot is either an ideology involving absolute evil or an impractical utopia. Yet as effective as this approach is, it is still coercive. Sometimes a donkey will buck at this authoritarian restriction of his visual field. Keep in mind that the purpose of the carrot is precisely to promote free and voluntary progress. It is easy to

see that the best way to focus the will of the animal on a single object is to take away everything else around him so that nothing can distract him from his desire. In the desert there is no need for blinders. So a desert must be made.

Once you capture the donkey's attention, the real work begins. There are two competing sets of interests: the donkey wants to eat the carrot; the donkey trainer wants the donkey to walk. How do we reconcile the two? The animal has to substitute his internal motivation (hunger, desire) for the external one (the carrot, and the path to obtain it). This phase is called *identification*. Next, once he is hooked, he has to change his behavior and do what is necessary to reach his goal. There is a greater chance of success if the subject is convinced that he is acting freely and without any outside influence. This is the phase known as *adaptation*. It spreads easily in mammals with a more social nature than with donkeys, which are more solitary—so let's add a few colleagues. For at this stage a key phenomenon comes into play. Each individual colleague believes he has to take a step forward. Why? Because he is convinced that all the others will take a step as well. This is called *emulation* or free competition. Each believes because he has no choice but to believe, since everyone else believes—"everyone else" being the sum of each person who believes, etc. It's how a perception becomes an "incontrovertible reality."

The next phase in the process is called *well-sublimated failure*. For there is clearly no question of whether the goal can be achieved, otherwise he would stop walking and enjoy his

success and the whole thing would have been in vain. Still, it is essential to keep the animal from thinking that all hope of success is impossible, which would equally compromise his forward motion. Satisfaction should appear as deferred but never unreachable. The unsuccessful attempt should be compensated, that is, converted into a growing effort. This is the most delicate moment. Here specialists in positive thinking encourage the donkeys with maxims like this one, coined by Churchill: “Success is the ability to move from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.”

Once this stage is reached, the worst is over. Going forward, one can count on another factor known as *routine*. The animal continues along on its path at a regular pace, no longer asking the question why. More precisely, the question is inverted for him. He will ask himself: what reason do I have to stop? What matters now is no longer the relevance of the motivation that got him going, but the absence of sufficiently powerful alternative motivations that would lead him to question the path he is on. Also, so long as an imperious reason doesn’t draw him away from his current behavior, he will continue working.

Let’s admit it: the fact that donkeys are systematically fooled by such a simple approach doesn’t speak well for their powers of discernment. Nevertheless, in their favor, one should acknowledge that they don’t have a donkeys’ union, demanding: “more carrots, fewer sticks!” It is a well-known fact that, at the end of the trail, the most deserving donkey enjoys the juiciest carrot. That wasn’t so long ago. For the global context no longer

permits that sort of generosity. Subject to brutal competition, the muleskinners are not likely to waste expensive carrots in this manner. In order to lower the cost of labor, they substitute colorful images of juicy carrots, or they hire communications specialists who try to persuade the donkeys that the pole from which nothing is hanging is itself a succulent dish. Or that the stick will transform itself into a carrot when one is beaten on the back enough. We have to admire their efforts.

What I have outlined in broad strokes is nothing other than the theory of motivation as it is distilled in austere treatises of psychology and put into practice in expensive seminars. What is a motive? It is in the most basic sense *that which leads to movement*. By extension it is a reason to act. Motivation is, then, the creation and communication of motives to get people to move in a direction that is seen as useful, or (to speak the language of our times) to make them continuously more *flexible* and *mobile*.

In all sectors of society today the battle over motivation is raging. The unemployed don't earn the right to exist unless they present proof that they are constantly searching for nonexistent jobs. During the employment interview, it isn't so much competence that matters as the enthusiastic demonstration of flawless subservience. Those who still have work can only hope to keep their position by identifying heart and soul with the firm, letting themselves be led wherever this loyalty takes them, embracing its "cause" for better or (more often) for worse. And the reality of motivation doesn't stop at the office door. It is also imposed on the consumer who is required to be attentive to all the lat-

est products and to confirm his loyalty to the brands that have hooked him. And on the adolescent who must be formed—perhaps we should say be *formatted*—according to the demands of the market, no less than on the elderly who have to pay off their debt to a world that has had the generosity of keeping them alive. Regardless of age, the viewer has to make increasing amounts of brainpower available to receive the endless stream of media bits that constitute his reality. Once the television is off, there are still all of the artists who want to *make him move*, the activists who want to *mobilize* him, the time and relationships that he has to *manage*, and his own image that he is forced to *make more dynamic*; in brief, there is not a moment that shouldn't be under the regime of the useful, under the categorical imperative of movement. Nothing but carrots for such miserable donkeys!

Motivation is a central question of our epoch and it is bound to become even more so. This is first of all because total commodification demands it. Today everything is subject to commerce: every desire, every aspiration, and every impulse. The flagship products that dominate the market are not just any objects supposed to perform this or that function, but rather slices of prefabricated lifestyles. And the consumer must identify with them; he must make their motives his own. Each of us has within our beings what were once known as “the passions of the soul” as well as a heritage of previous traditions (at least what is left of them). This entire inventory must be mobilized, remodeled, packaged, labeled, made exchangeable with products of equal value. So as much at the beginning of the process, in what

we still call work, as further down, in what can be called consumption (though these two moments are increasingly difficult to distinguish), it's a matter of making it so that people's minds are entirely *occupied* by this infinite task.

The second reason motivation is more crucial than ever is that the real needs of individuals to which social institutions once claimed to respond (we could mention among others, the need for stability, the thirst for social encounters, the pleasure of mutual recognition, the hope for a better life) have been systematically destroyed by market colonization. The ideals and the promises that in good and bad times were the cause of compromise and renunciation are henceforward labeled as archaisms that must be completely and quickly annihilated. If people need to be constantly motivated, it is because they are increasingly de-motivated. In the employment sector, all the indicators point to a decrease in "investment" on the part of workers in their jobs. This is not only the case among precarious and poorly paid workers, but also among middle management and top executives. In the consumer sector, the major markets are seeing a growing dissatisfaction among customers, to an increasing extent due to a saturation effect: the result of a decreasing interest in making purchases more than the fabled "decline in purchasing power." In the media sector, the homogenization of information (in form as well as content) appears to be creating a global crisis of confidence. As for the political sphere, the principle of communicating vessels between government and opposition, according to which the decline in popularity of one

brought about an equal rise in that of the other, has generally ceased to apply in democratic nations. There is just one ideology left and it is met with unanimous disinterest. In a more general sense, “the imperative of growth,” to which everything else is subordinated, but whose purpose is more and more difficult to discern, is no longer enough to justify the sacrifices required.

To sum it up, the more the markets need motivation from the people, the more they lack it. The more the system’s technological devices appear irresistible, the weaker their ability to solicit voluntary cooperation. At the very moment when global capital seems to have removed all external obstacles that formerly slowed its development, an internal factor threatens it: the growing dissatisfaction of its human resources, without which the system is nothing. This is the soft underbelly of the colossus. Contrary to what Marx believed, in the end the limit to World Trade, Inc.<sup>1</sup> might not be objective, but subjective, namely: the tendency of the rate of motivation to fall. Of all the factors that contribute to this state of affairs, the traffic jam plays a special role. The story is

1 Everyone has a vague idea of what capitalism is. But many would have a really hard time giving a definition. Of course there is one—there are many, even; nevertheless it is good to be wary of the falsities that the usage of a generic term ends up carrying, as it will tend to close the possibility of reexamination. The familiar is not necessarily the known. In his complete works, Marx did not write the word “capitalism” one single time; he had no need to. At the same time, it is difficult to not give a name to that which so clearly makes up a system. Here I will use the term World Trade, Inc., not because it is more precise, but on the contrary because it is a figure and not a concept, which keeps a certain allusive distance from what is signified. I could have just as easily said “the big thingy.” But World Trade, Inc. is a bit more explicit. It’s clearly something global, with a central activity that is commercial, and is also something that is incorporated, which is to say, embodied by corporations.

well known. Everybody buys a car, promising individual freedom, speed and power, only to find himself stuck in traffic because other motorists, driven by the same motives, did the same thing. But it is too late to be able to do without a car. However, suddenly a new product is released offering that special something, as well as freedom, to its owner. Everyone hurries to buy it, with, of course, the same result. In this situation it isn't really accurate to say we are in a traffic jam; the bitter truth is that we *are* the traffic jam! To the extent that congestion extends from one end of the market to another, the life span of each supposed motive leading there decreases. The obvious approach is to rapidly create new motives, but the likely result is that they will end up creating their own motive-jam. It is not just that people overwhelmed with temptations won't know where to turn their attention, but the traffic jam will likely result also in the other direction—brands trying to reach increasingly unavailable customers.

And that is not all, because getting caught in traffic jams makes the workday longer and results in lower pay per hour. It is logical: the more people end up being included, the less the role of each person in creating wealth, and the more each is an interchangeable unit. There is always someone somewhere who will do what you do for less. And so the gap between the promised land *as seen on TV* and the real world widens. The era in which we were promised that Progress would bring not only more goods, but also less work, is over. From now on everyone subject to the market is constantly in a double bind: expect lower pay and consume more; be creative and admit that there is



no alternative; be loyal and remember that you are replaceable at will; be a unique individual and submit to the needs of the team; be egotistical and be ashamed to defend your interests; orgasm and at the same time practice abstinence. If you obey one order, you will disobey the other. Now you go and be motivated under such conditions!

Many people have pointed out the crisis of motivation in order to condemn this crisis. I believe, rather, that we should welcome this situation as an opportunity. If you distrust the pace at which things are changing, better to slow down. If you're unsure of your escape route ahead, it is advised you turn away from the carrots dangled in front of you. If capitalism has as an essential precondition the motivation of its agents, it is logical to conclude that for the opponents and victims of its development, demotivation is a necessary stage.

When I told my circle that I planned to write this elegy, I noted a certain disapproval, or at least a manifest lack of comprehension in my interlocutors. I get it: as if we weren't demotivated enough as it is! As if our epoch doesn't suffer from chronic anomie, from a dramatic absence of motives. Isn't the problem rather that the ideals, the general objectives, the utopias, the reasons to act that animated previous generations have disappeared from the surface of the social field? And certainly a long list of today's motives would look more like a cemetery of uniforms and liveries, as Duchamp put it.

As for the Left, what happened to the strategies of rupture, self-management, the power of the soviets, the tomorrows

when anything is possible? There has been a clear defeat of those who thought that socialism actually existed in some part of the world. But also the denial, based on experience, that the scientific method could guarantee social change. More important still, the loss of the lovely assurance that history has a “meaning” that, even if in roundabout ways, will lead humanity to a glorious future. And finally, the nagging doubt that all these prescriptive utopias may not be practical or even desirable. And the activists who try to revive them, without themselves really believing in them, are chasing after wind.

But look at the right too: what has happened to the traditional institutions and values that only a few decades ago were seen as the indispensable pillars of order and civilization? The nation, patriotism, the apostolic and Catholic Church, military service, bourgeois culture, patriarchy,<sup>2</sup> Sunday lamb dinner with the family? They have melted like icebergs exposed to global warming and it is clearly not our thumbing our noses at them, as we felt compelled to do as adolescents, that is making things worse. These notions were already moribund then; in fact, today they are among those species considered “extinct in the wild.” Now you have to go to the zoo to see them.

As for the center, what is left of “the greatest happiness for the greatest number” with its social security, guaranteed

2 There are still people valiantly fighting patriarchy, but I ask you this: where are the patriarchs? If Freud’s theory, according to which the authoritarian father is to the individual what institutions are to the social order, were true, then anarchy would have reigned for some time now! But, as one might note, the evaporation of the severe Father has not made way for fraternity, far from it. There are those calling for his return so that he may finally be killed.

employment, increasing free time, democratic involvement, improved education and public health services, and retirement and funeral expenses guaranteed? All the elements of this lukewarm but certain comfort which were thought to be the norm, are now being swept away like empty champagne bottles after the all night party that was the golden years from 1945 to 1975. The gently sloping stairs that one gracefully ascended one after the other now opens into a huge hole. Some fall, some hang on. It's the nasty reality of competition.

Finally we look up into the air and find the intellectuals: "there are simulacra everywhere!"—post-modernism, post-history, post-humanism, post-critique, anything so long as it is "post" and now even post-post. Of course, this form of elegant resignation makes us smile ("we have nothing left to hope for but a university post") but it points to a widely held state of mind, the sense that nothing is moving forward, that all the hands have been played, the future is past, and struggle is impossible. If it weren't the extreme right, the Islamists, the homophobes and the smokers—that is to say, all those who pretend to embody the past—one wonders what could still provoke public rage today. Such an absence of hope is not so much despair since there is an energy in despair; nor is it inertia: on the contrary, everything must "move" faster and faster. It is manic-depressive nihilism.

The difference between ancient society, modernism, and post-modernism is this: the ancients knew that they believed, the modernists believed that they knew, and the post-modernists

believe that they don't believe in anything anymore. It is precisely this latter belief that we have to destroy. What we need to criticize in the disabused pose of those who have walked away from everything without having been anywhere is not their giving up of illusions, but that all the illusions they encourage about the world they describe as rational are in fact filled with spells, magical rituals and sacred carrots. For if the ancient idols have been thrown to the bonfire of the vanities, it is in the name of a monotheism so much more voracious that it remains the only social force. If it is not seen, it is because it is everywhere, and so it presents itself as the only truth, naked and undeniable. Everything has been deconstructed, demystified, demolished, discredited, superseded, decomposed, cut in slices, digested, defecated. Everything? No. Nobody touches the market. It's taboo. It proliferates like algae that take over all the space around it, eliminating other species. It is the religion of *World Trade, Inc.* Yet just as Christianity did not completely eliminate the pagan gods, but integrated them into its universe in the bastardized forms of the Virgin Mary and the saints, the monotheism of the market has not completely destroyed the human motives that were once outside of it. It has monopolized them—in denaturing them, in reforming them so that they conform to its ends—to the point of making them unrecognizable. To believe that motivation is lacking in this world is to misunderstand the mutant forms through which it expresses itself.

Is it necessary to clarify that it is not a question here of making a cynical apology for a social system in which the

norm is a pathetic and feeble vegetative state? The absence of a taste for life, the smothering of passions, is only the flipside of the total mobilization required by World Trade, Inc., and is its symptom. You don't treat bulimia with anorexia! No, the objective of practicing demotivation, and this treatise is a modest step in that direction, would be rather to divest oneself from the apparatuses used to lead all of us donkeys to the market, to methodically dismantle the mechanisms that ensure that, despite everything, *it works*.

Some might say: that's not enough, you have to give people reasons to fight, motivate them to seek a better world, offer them visions of well-being, of beauty, of justice. Not really. I do not hold the view that this is the role of critique. Self-limitation is required. If one opposes the way our energies are captured by the exterior force of the market, it is not in order to *prescribe* in turn behaviors and goals intended to be more desirable. We have already seen plenty of these utopias that ridicule the current carrots only in order to replace them with even more tyrannical ones. In a certain sense they all resemble the reigning directive in Thomas More's *Utopia*: "Everyone goes to bed at eight o'clock and sleeps for eight hours!"

Besides, the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has thoroughly demonstrated that the attempts to oppose World Trade, Inc. with *models* of behavior aimed to subvert it have in the end provided it with its best weapons. Today the managers want nothing less than to make every employee a situationist, enjoining them to be spontaneous, creative, autonomous, freewheeling, unattached,

and greeting the precariousness of their lives with open arms. Trying to outdo this would be absurd. On the other hand, limiting the critique to the domain of the negative, without prescribing a specific goal, is to show great optimism stemming from the hypotheses (obviously unproven) that most people have within them all the energy necessary for their autonomy without there being the need to add any. In his time Lichtenberg wrote, "Nothing is more unfathomable than the system of motivation behind our actions." One can hope that this impenetrability can definitively restore its rights.

# II

## COMPULSORY MARKETS

*Far from the market and from fame  
happens everything that is great*

—Nietzsche

Today a more or less lively notion remains of what, for centuries and with surprising similarity from one society to another, constitutes what one would call a *market*. The word immediately evokes an abundance of sensual images. The market was... smells, shouting, colors, in short an eminently sensory experience. It was clearly defined in space, by a square, as well as in time, by set days and hours. It was certainly a crucial event (most towns were built around it), but nevertheless particular, neither spilling over into the rest of existence nor following the rules and values in place outside of it. The market was also limited by the number of transactions that could take place there. The market farmer couldn't sell more vegetables than he could grow; the regular shopper didn't buy more than his family could eat. So the system was in equilibrium. It would have been absurd to think that a market could expand or grow indefinitely. Inextricably linked to a locality, its boundaries were clear. But this is not to say that this was a harmless affair. In many cultures, taboo hedged in and often interrupted its operations. Among the Chaga, a single drop of blood immediately stopped commerce until all the merchandise was cleaned and a goat (or a cow in extreme cases) was sacrificed. As Karl Polanyi remarked, "rules

such as these did not make the spreading of markets easier.” In preindustrial Europe, for all the independence towns enjoyed, they strongly regulated their markets in order to protect local products from the incursions of long-distance traders. Even if it might have been technically possible, it would still have been inconceivable in that era, where rationality had not yet completely taken over, to sell Dutch tomatoes in Provence or Egyptian potatoes in Germany. Though it has grown from an immemorial tradition, the market’s organization was not spontaneous, but based on imperative limitations. It is as if men have always understood that the power that underlies these exchanges must be strictly contained at the risk of seeing it hypertrophy, become autonomous, and turn against them.

Of course, both dirty tricks and falsification are as old as commerce, and the chronicles of the Middle Ages are filled with arguments over wine cut with water and bread made with sawdust that frequently ended with people at daggers drawn. But that’s simply because the buyer-seller relation took place face to face. It was possible to unite the crowd against an insensitive street vendor and to challenge his reputation. It was also possible to bargain—more often than not it was the rule. Prices were not determined by some objective and unquestionable truth, but were an uncertain result of verbal jousting that did not go beyond the limits of practical calculation, but was rather a source of amusement. The souk merchant despised the buyer who refused to bargain. The refusal to discuss price was an insult to his humanity and a clear sign of barbarism.



Once the purchases were completed, the townspeople met to socialize over a glass of wine. Buying and selling were opportunities for exchange in the former (and dated, unfortunately) sense of this word: to be friendly and to trade ideas. This was the moment when city life was debated, when politics took center position. The agora and the forum were marketplaces. In sum, the circulation of commodities and money overlapped with the circulation of decisions and information. Incidentally, traveling salesmen were often the communicators of new ideas and heresies. And naturally it was on market day when street protests and riots\* broke out since that was where both townspeople and farmers could air their grievances.

In the preceding description I have deliberately used the past tense, because anyone can see that markets have become scarce in *the market economy*. All things considered, it is actually more accurate to talk of today's "hypermarket economy" with all the imposed choices, outsourcing, anonymity, and somnambulism it entails. The spontaneity and freedom of commerce that we are always hearing about are not available to everyone. Go ahead and try to sell something outside of regulated markets: you will quickly be suspected of black marketing, if not fraud and breaking European norms. Let it be said in passing, this aspect is rarely mentioned by those who pontificate on the "problem of exclusion." When he needs money, what does a poor person do in a country where "the freedom of commerce" is not actually practiced? He could, for example, buy some shish

\* *émotion* is an old word for *émeute*, riot

kebabs, grill them, and sell them on a street corner. If an unemployed person set up this kind of business here, there would immediately be thirty helmeted cops on his back. Deregulation does not include him.

What is so redundantly called the “the market” today is completely different from what was, for centuries, understood by this term. It is a derivative meaning (and not just for the actual “derivatives markets”); we use the word by extension, as the dictionary says, but we must be wary of this kind of extension of the letter that hides a rupture in meaning. It would be more accurate to say that today’s use of the term is an *usurpation* in the sense that it refers to something radically different from its primary meaning. Historically speaking, moreover, it is wrong to believe that local markets expanded to become national, then global ones. How could they have done this? Quite the contrary, local markets were eliminated by long-distance commerce, the latter achieving success as the State, for its own ends, destroyed the political autonomy of cities. Built on the demolition of local barriers, the national market is the negation of the traditional market, for the same reasons that the Ségolène/Sarkozy<sup>3</sup> version of politics is the negation of binding debate as it was practiced in the agora. In both cases the very meaning of one word obscures the rupture of truth. As for the globalized market, it is the result of a later deception: the takeover of commerce by capital (and it is enough to read Marx

3 [Ségolène Royal and Nicolas Sarkozy ran against each other in the French presidential elections in 2007. –Tr.]

to learn that this takeover was already well advanced in his time). Once the national framework became an obstacle to the expansion of World Trade, Inc., the political State found itself stripped of its powers in much the same way as the city-state of the Middle Ages once did; today it exists only to pay for damages and to ensure that order reigns. State and market happened together and are in league with one another to a high degree in the abstraction, delocalization, incapacitation, and control of their subjects.

What is the market today, whether it is the market of exchange, work, furniture, sex, or cons? Those who use this word haphazardly (that is, everybody) would be hard pressed to provide a satisfying and precise definition, and with good reason: there isn't one. Specialized dictionaries offer responses that are at best evasive: it is "the meeting place, more or less materialized, of supply and demand", or "a system of economic exchange" or "the ensemble of commercial relations concerning a category of goods." While the CEO of a company tends to see a *number*, the potential customers for his junk, the economist talks about a *mechanism* for setting prices, which is something else all together. In fact, the easiest thing is to give a negative definition. What we call a market today is, in every way, the opposite of a traditional market. It is not contained in a particular place, limited in time nor in the volume of products sold, it tends toward perpetual growth and excludes all other forms of social relations. And let's not forget that it evades direct control (and sensual pleasure), gossip, and controversy, because direct rela-

tions are eliminated in favor of a system of abstract rules that, we are told, are subject to intangible laws.

An economist will reply that these laws have always existed in the implicit forms I spoke of earlier. Simply put, the expansion of the market to the national and then global level has eliminated the incidental forms that it could have taken on up until then, now keeping only the rough form. In the end, it's still a matter of buying and selling. To this unfortunately so widely held notion that the thing is not transformed by the suppression of its concrete determinations, a Moroccan, Naïma Benabdelali, replies in wonder,

The Western method of reasoning proceeds by elimination, by pruning; it is an autumnal method of analysis, it disembodies and removes the decoration, the foliage, to get to the essential structure, believing that it has found the spirit of a people in the stripped branches, when, perhaps it is the foliage that gives meaning to the tree.<sup>4</sup>

Today, markets are these stripped trees in the barren winter of social relations.

For this is, first and foremost, a matter of analytical method. As soon as a process can no longer be understood by direct experience, it is only possible to grasp its meaning with the aid of modeling. If you can't see it, you have to think it, formulate a hypothesis about it. Even though, obviously, you can see that commodities are bought and sold everywhere all the time,

4 Naïma Benabdelali, *Le don et l'anti-économique dans la société arabo-musulmane*, EDDIF, Casablanca, 1999.

it is only possible to have access to the totality of these acts through an *interpretive model*, and the market cannot be anything but this. It is probably useful to insist on this point, since the media confers the qualities of a living being on the market, a pseudo-divinity: the market “doesn’t allow this,” “demands,” the markets “are nervous,” etc. The question is whether this model of interpretation is adequate. Without spending too much time on the subject, I want to demonstrate why it is not.

Since a market is described as a set or a system, it should be possible to rigorously define the elements that comprise it and those which are excluded. Is this really the case? When the papers announce, “there is an upward trend in the auto market” what they are really saying is that more cars were sold than last month. What is communicated is a simple *index*. But we learn nothing about the causes of the increase. And yet these causes can be as multiple as they are diverse. Sales can be stimulated by the effective marketing of new models, but it could have also been the result of drivers worried about their finances who have held onto their cars for as long as possible (which previously caused a decrease in sales) finally having no choice but to buy one. Government regulation might have played a role: the DMV might have forced old cars off the road. An infrastructure change such as an elimination of a regional train route might have also contributed to the increase in car sales. Or, forced by their respective employers to be more flexible, families may no longer have been able to get by with one car. Not to mention constant factors like job-related relocation, the fantasy of au-

tonomy that the car is supposed to fulfill, the dominance of the oil lobby that (still) prevents the use of other sources of energy, etc. All of these forces assail from all sides the closed system known as “the car market,” expansive as its definition might be. Not only is there no barrier between this market and other markets, but forces are at play that are excluded by definition from a market role, such as the changing subjectivity of the buyers or (horror of horrors!) State intervention. Even with a phenomenon as simple in appearance as the manufacturing and sale of cars, a number of external factors intervene, be they psychological, political, professional, or something else. To reduce this indefinite mass of decisions, desires, and constraints to a *mechanism* by which a “supply” and a “demand” encounter each other to set a price, is to formulate a metaphysical proposition.

A second limit of this interpretive model is that it throws unrelated phenomena into the same bag. At least in the auto market one thing is clear:  $x$  number of cars are put up for sale and in the optimal case they will all be sold. It can be  $x-y$ , but never  $x+y$ . Nobody counts on cars having offspring. The financial markets are completely different because when you sell money you get it back with profits (if all goes according to plan). What we call the “financial markets” are no longer simple systems of circulation, for if a car loses value as it circulates, money gains it as it circulates. In this case, the metaphor of the small town market is way off, but it is not used naïvely. It is used because it suggests that what has taken place is but one among many variations of exchange. And yet, as we all know,

this is not at all the case: the movements of capital take place *above* other activities; it is what controls and extracts energy from them. Using the same term for both kinds of markets deceptively conceals the pyramidal order of World Trade, Inc. Let's note for that matter that the so-called financial markets lend themselves least of all to a basic science with parameters that could be analyzed rationally and with operations, subject to constant laws, that would be predictable. It is the domain par excellence of rumors, impulses, and panics, where even false reports can become true, meaning they are self-fulfilling as a result of the credibility granted to them, and are then converted into financial gains. George Soros knows a thing or two about this. What is the difference between a hen that lays golden eggs and a **soap** bubble? Faith in the hen. Here the appropriate interpretive model actually comes from mass psychology, particularly the analysis of collective hysteria.

Which reminds me of an anecdote, something that happened one famous Friday in October of 1987. That morning the media announced that, following a mere sound bite from Alan Greenspan, the head of the Fed at that time, the worst stock market crash in the previous six decades had just begun. Little by little thousands of people from all over New York converged on Wall Street. Without quite understanding why, the police noticed that this crowd had raised their eyes to the sky. Until it became clear: everyone was waiting for the first desperate stockbrokers to throw themselves out of the windows. The images from 1929 were in everyone's memories, and nobody wanted to miss the

events live. The crises of some provide the entertainment of others. Of course a financial crisis wouldn't do anything to help the fate of the little people, but at least they didn't want to miss the consoling spectacle of the cursed yuppies crashing into the sidewalk. The crowd waited a long time and nothing happened. Gradually a rumor spread. Nothing was going to happen. Nobody was going to jump out of a window. Since the advent of air conditioning, it is no longer possible to open a single window on Wall Street. Disappointed, the masses went home. They probably thought: shit, even life's simplest pleasures are spoiled by modern technology. All this to show to what point outside influences can affect the spread of stock market panic.

To return to the manipulative terminology created by the dominant interpretive model: the most patent example is in the *labor market*. There is no clearer sign of the effectiveness of the brainwashing of economists' minds than the fact that so many can use this term without shuddering, no longer questioning its reductionist duplicity. Let's begin with the question: who is selling and who is buying in the labor market? And also: what commodity is the object of the transaction? How is the price determined? Finally, where is the freedom of contract, which always implies the freedom not to enter into a contract? Let those who see an equal exchange here go ahead and try to fire their employer! Again, more obviously than anywhere else, we are dealing with a fiction.

That having been said, we have to immediately make clear that to label the definition of the market as an interpretive



model in no way means that it would be possible to provide an alternative, more appropriate interpretation of what is really going on. Moreover, to say that this model is based on a fiction does not mean that here and now there is an alternative reality that would be protected from it. We are all well aware that the market is not just an idea and that we are not free to choose to or choose not to participate in it. It is an institutional, dominant reality. But this does not contradict our position. The Catholic Church is also an institutional reality that has dominated for centuries, and it relies just as much on an entirely interpretive model that we have the right to consider fictional. In both cases, the freedom to reject these models is completely relative: to withdraw from the Catholic Church was to risk the stake; to withdraw from the market is to risk starving to death. Unlike a bacterium that has no need to be known in order to do its thing, an institutional reality exists only to the extent that we believe in it. But unlike the belief in UFOs or in the integrity of this or that cabinet minister, the existence of this reality is objective: we can't withdraw from it as long as everyone believes in it, and among the believers there are those with all the means of imposing this belief.

For this reason, it is appropriate to distinguish between the market and the *ideology* of the market as it has taken shape from Adam Smith to the neoliberals, which is the one we are offered everyday through electronic and print media. Everybody knows that the latter consists of affirming that the market has an existence independent of our subjective perspectives to-

ward it, shaped as we all are by the omnipotent “invisible hand.” Nobody is forced to adopt this ideology and it has even been criticized by talented and convincing opponents (the critique of the market has become a growing market in itself). But quite obviously, the markets themselves are not in the least affected by critical theory. The interpretive model is not simply a false idea tacked onto the social reality. As an institution it penetrates the social reality, transforms it, remodels it for the obvious reason that what is referred to as “social reality” is only the sum of beliefs, habits, and institutions. An institution can only be displaced by another institution. That is, incidentally, what in the past few hundred years various socialist, mutualist, and cooperative movements have attempted. Unfortunately, as Hannah Arendt has observed, false ideas can become reality as well as truthful ones. She was obviously alluding to Nazism, whose racial theories, delirious as they were, were diabolically effective so long as the Nuremberg laws stood, with the very real consequences we all know. As revolting and false as the differentiation between Jews and Aryans might have appeared at the time, there was no choice but to conform to them (in public at least)—to do otherwise risked deadly consequences.<sup>5</sup> I haven’t chosen this example to create a pointless mash-up but to underline the difference between truth and effectiveness.

5   Traces of this institutional reality survive even after its invalidation: to say that the Nazis killed six million Jews is to paradoxically validate the Nuremberg Laws criteria. These six million were only Jews according to the definition of these laws (it was enough to have had a Jewish grandparent). Many did not consider themselves as such beforehand.

If the market model is effective, it is because it has been instituted by *acts of force* that are of an institutional nature. This is true when a company patents an ancient technique (the use of a medicinal plant, for example), stockpiling this type of public knowledge particularly when the originators of this technique have no way to defend their rights. It is also the case when a natural resource is privatized with the specious pretext that access to that resource became possible through private means. Until recently, discovering a new planet using a telescope did not confer any ownership of the planet in question. This is not the case in the gene pool, the ownership of which has been claimed in all legality by the private tyrannies. Not long ago, the classic economic works taught that certain resources were not commodities insofar as, not being rare, they make up our shared heritage. Water was an invariably cited example. Today, in the film *We Feed The World*<sup>6</sup>, the likeable CEO of Nestlé calls this an “extremist” point of view. Water, because of its indisputable value, he says, naturally has a price. Moreover, only this price is capable of determining who has access to drinking water, which fortunately for him, has in fact become scarce. Here, as elsewhere, a market exists because a social group does not have the resources to resist the dictates of the profiteers.

And yet, the market is the domain of reflexivity par excellence. I can announce that a resource is my property, which will do me little good if nobody else acknowledges it as such. I can put the moon up for sale, but if there are no interested buy-

6 A film by Erwin Wagenhofer, 2007.

ers, no market will exist. If I approach a woman on the street and ask her what she will charge to spend the night with me, there's a good chance that she will slug me in response. By doing so she is unequivocally stating that she is not interested in submitting to the laws of supply and demand. For a market to exist people must think of themselves as, and behave like, contracting parties. Why do the majority of people not feel like they are most of the time living under the strict authority of illegitimate misers? Because the abstraction of the model of the market allows it to spread, to integrate itself into the collective mentality, to enter into domains where such forces had not previously existed; in a word, it *becomes natural*. It is no longer perceived as a force imposed from the exterior but as a field of reality. Better: it *is* this field, insofar as everyone believes that it is.

Just forty years ago, only managers and the government preoccupied themselves with the market. I don't remember hearing the term used much when I was a child. Society has clearly not become what Adam Smith said it was, a **“nation of buyers and sellers,”** until the so-called “post-industrial era” through the dominance of the *service sector*. Today in Germany, 3% of the working population works in agriculture, 22% in industry and the remaining three quarters in service. Now, for such a sector to exist, the service providers must consider it legitimate to *sell a service rather than offer it freely*. Of course the necessity of earning a living leaves them no choice.<sup>7</sup> But nobody acts freely if they are threatened with the stick of necessity. Be-

7 Let's emphasize this: money is never a motive, but always an imperative.

believing that their work fits into the natural order of supply and demand legitimizes it in their eyes. This legitimacy is reconfirmed by clients who readily call on service vendors to, as they see it, simplify their lives, provide a shortcut. But in order to pay for this shortcut they usually have to have a service to sell themselves. By reinforcing each other in this way, habits based on an interpretation of human relations acquire a relative stability and appear to those who convey them as an exterior and immutable reality. Clearly this appearance of objectivity is amplified by the media's dissemination of the market model. Being a form of thought, this model is inseparable from a language, and it is not for nothing that with the generalization of commodity services, barbaric expressions like "managing" one's time or relationships have spread like wildfire.

All relations involving at least two individuals can be seen in terms of service, can be based on a contractual relationship, can be negotiated with one another as equals and thus can have a price. From that point on, there is no limit to the extension of this model. In the past it would never have occurred to anyone that all the aspects of human existence could be turned into markets in which each person is in competition with everyone else to create consistent demand. But as soon as a sufficient number of "actors" understand their relations as being determined by this unavoidable model, all others effectively are as well. Let's take an example that remains outside of the grips of the market: something ordinary, a circle of friends who invite one another over for drinks, a meal or a party. Obviously

it would never occur to anyone to *make one's guests pay* for the cost of drinks and food consumed, with the added “costs” of space, the time spent preparing, the opportunity for people to meet one another, etc. The mind reviles at the very notion that one could act in such a way (at least I can hope so). Such an approach lacks the most basic principles of hospitality and generosity. And even if one put oneself in a perverse self-centered perspective in a context where such things “are not done,” the host who insisted on compensation would be acting against his own interests because he would be instantly seen as an ill-mannered scrooge, that is, he would be sacrificing his reputation for an insignificant financial gain.

However, it is easy to show that making your guests pay is completely understandable from an accounting perspective. Costs are incurred, time is invested, and they have to be recovered. I worked hard for my money and so throwing it away is out of the question. Of course you can respond that inviting someone over results in an invitation from them, so that it is a zero sum game: each guest eventually playing the host role (in which case each guest benefits in turn). Doing this, you're only making matters worse, as I would say that this proves that this so-called generosity is nothing but hypocrisy. In fact, everyone is always acting according to his or her own egoistic logic, each expects compensation from the others, so it's better if things are clear, stripped of the myth of altruism and other antiquated moralities. Besides, how can you tell that an invitation will actually be forthcoming and that the reciprocal evening will be on the

same level as what you offered? To guarantee reciprocity, pay at the end of the evening.

I have taken on the perspective of the host. But I could also look at things from the point of view of the guest. For example, I might wonder: can I be sure that this invitation is truly disinterested? Does my host have hidden motives for inviting me, sexual, professional, or something else? Once suspicion is raised, the air has to be cleared. It's simple: by paying him I am free of all further obligations. The invitation is a contract of limited duration and I conserve my independence. Beginning to despair that you can lead me back to reason, you shout, "But in the end, there are things you do with strangers, but not with friends!" This argument can easily be rebutted. Inviting only friends is not freeing but *limiting*. Having people pay to eat at my home, I can have people I don't know participate, increasing the range of possible encounters, and in return I might not hesitate to invite myself over to a multitude of places where I don't know anybody, even in cities where I have no acquaintances; in short, I increase my *freedom of choice*. Better: the generalization of this approach promotes imitation and competition, each host trying to distinguish himself by hosting exceptional dinners. In this way everyone benefits from a general improvement of dinner parties. "In that case, it's no different from going to a restaurant or a club!" you finally scream. But no: spending an evening in someone's home addresses other needs, more personalized, more intimate, more authentic.

It makes perfect sense then that you should open up your wallet as soon as you are invited to dinner. If this practice

is not (yet) commonplace, it is because it clashes with customs and mores that forbid it. This is an important point. One is too easily imposed upon by the “logic” of a shift. If D occurs, it is a result of the A, B, and C leading up to it; thus, D is inevitable. But this type of observation is only possible in retrospect, when D has already happened. This is really only a tautology. What has happened has happened. And yet there are always chains of causality that are possible, plausible and logical things that will not happen, that will remain virtual, because they come up against *resistances*. The Chinese invented paper money long before the Europeans, but the Emperor put a stop to its use, which prevented capitalist logic from taking hold in China. To return to our example, it is not inconceivable to imagine that in the near future the norm of paying to be a guest at a dinner party will have taken hold (there are already people who are paid to help with dinner parties!). Then people will say: it couldn’t have turned out otherwise; it is the logic of things. But it is also possible, and I hope it is so, that the laws of hospitality will hold up against the laws of the market.

Now, imagine landing in a country where the custom is to pay to attend dinner parties. What can you do? There are in fact only three solutions. You can continue to invite people over without charging them, but you will quickly start to feel like a sucker who is exploited without compensation, not thanked by your guests, (gratitude being inseparable from reciprocity), and you will come to see your guests only as parasites, which will make this approach seriously unappealing. Or you can refuse to



play the game and not have any dinner parties. In this case, your sense of dignity will be intact but you will suffer from social isolation, which is difficult to sustain. Finally, heartsick, you give in and play the game: you participate in the great dinner-party market. In all three cases the norm is the winner.

The naturalization of the market is inseparable from a denaturing of individual motives. This is most clear in a market niche that is growing rapidly: *coaching*, which is “guiding a person in the mobilization of their resources.” Professional advancement is most often the reason for this mobilization, but the “private” sphere might also be its object insofar as it might also be interpreted in terms of supply and demand. With the growing number of the underprivileged, the precarious, and all of those who don’t know what their place is in this world and where to go, the demand for guidance is exploding, and so is the number of guides: those who can’t find a job can help other people find one! In principle, everyone could become a *coach* after having gone through workshops taught by the other ex-unemployed. There are several schools. Transactional analysis, for example, begins with the principle that “the coached is capable of changing the beliefs about himself, the world, and others who prevent him from growing,” the method consists in establishing “relational contracts.” NLP (neuro-linguistic programming), on the other hand, states that the subject can “re-program his brain” to reach the desired state of excellence. The primary techniques of intervention are to visualize the desired state and the question of “how to get there.” What is not al-

lowed is to spend time “wondering why.”<sup>8</sup> I couldn’t have said it better.

It is not by chance that the series of operations by which this reprogramming of the brain is accomplished corresponds point for point with what Boltanski and Chiapello call “*the commodification of the authentic*.”<sup>9</sup> Everything begins with the search for “veins of authenticity:” offer up the whole list of your needs, aptitudes, values, tastes, desires, and ambitions, and together we will sort it out, then divide it into as many groups as the pertinent traits dictate. According to what criteria? It’s simple: if you want to be “self-realized,” turn your resources towards reality, meaning—*don’t get your hopes up*—the market. Submit your confused beliefs to the rigors of demand and eliminate those that are not successful—*who do you think you are?* So you have to *encode* your aspirations in order to turn them into a *supply*. But be careful: you are not expected to define a precise objective (become an Air France pilot, or hit on a redhead with a 40 inch bust). On the contrary: the goal is to reach a *state* where you are flexible and employable in the random conditions of competition and precariousness that are our common fate. As a general rule, the choice morsels of your personality will not be enough to create a credible profile, so it will be necessary to combine them with external factors. (To acquire them you might have to take a training course.) What Boltanski and Chiapello say

8 Found on Wikipedia.

9 L. Boltanski, E. Chiapello, *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999. [English edition: *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, 2007.]

about “authentic” commodities also applies to individuals who are properly prepared for the market: they are not standardized but codified, the piece-by-piece codification allowing them “to play with combinations and to introduce variations so as to get products that are different but part of the same style.” This is how one acquires a reconstituted personality (the same way we think of “reconstituted meat”); it retains enough of the original to not seem overly artificial but still fits into the requirements of the market. Put plainly: if you think you have a knack for poetry, find a job in publicity, and if you like nothing better than communicating with your peers, sell insurance over the phone.

An allegory will accurately represent the aim of the market as it expands into the whole of existence: I’m referring to reality TV, in particular those of the model referred to as “the rat cage.” We all know, in TV shows like *Big Brother* and *The Loft*, individuals isolated from the rest of the world live together and are eliminated by one by one by their peers or, even better, by the viewers. Their environment, stripped to the essentials, allows no escape from confrontations with the other contestants. Each will be judged according to his capacity to adapt to the collective while avoiding elimination and forcing the others out. Despite the laments of the sophisticated sectors at the success of this genre of programming, one has to acknowledge a notable educational quality, provided that it is seen for what it is: a presentation of *living commodities* in the sense that Klossowski speaks of “living money.” Undeniably, participation in this sort of ordeal is a kind of work. In Argentina the hit show *Recursos Huma-*

*nos* creates a competition among the unemployed, who must at once move the viewers with the tales of their tribulations and demonstrate their positive outlook and their employability: the winner receives an employment contract live on the show. Even in those programs where the issue of work is not so crudely evident, the winner receives cash and all the contestants count on momentary celebrity to catapult their careers to a new level. So it makes sense to see these rat cages as a way to look for work.

But these rat cages are also something else completely. For what is offered here are not professional skills, nor is it some kind of talent. The subject of reality TV is the most trivial and mundane part of existence. This is precisely where the living commodity distinguishes herself from the worker who “sells” eight hours of labor force each day, and, formally at least, keeps the rest for herself: the living commodity is on the market twenty-four hours a day. In effect, what she offers is charm, energy, and availability, all traits that can be nothing but a person’s constant state. She isn’t expected to perform exceptional feats but to optimize her behavior in banal situations. Already in this regard, the norms that determine reality TV are not different from those that govern job interviews. Just as the promise of the packaging is more important than its content, it’s been ages since real skills have been more highly valued than seduction and enthusiasm; what’s more, today these *are* the required skills.

Like inert commodities, the living commodity must demonstrate that she is rebellious and adapted, sociable and individualistic, that she knows how to stand out while remaining *cool*,

that despite being a risk-taker she still adheres to safety standards, and above all that she is *positive*. In a word, that she conforms to the double standard of being both authentic and seductive. She must seduce by simulating authenticity, which means making transparent only what she thinks the consumer expects. The cover letter, which is a rite of passage in getting any kind of work, is another example of these principles in operation.<sup>10</sup> The applicant knows that the employer knows that his cover letter presents a fictional image of himself (he would otherwise be eliminated by other applicants with better appearances). But this ability to fake is exactly what is required in a successful employee who is being hired based on his ability to seduce the customer. How can you sell something if you can't sell yourself? Acknowledging lacks and deficiencies is totally unacceptable in business. In this sense we are truly living in the society of the spectacle and it is perfectly accurate to say that the market is made up of economic *actors*! However this is a tenuous equilibrium because all the applicants strive to fit the same stereotype. That's the funny thing about manuals and classes teaching how to write a cover letter—they logically lead to standardized submissions between which a hiring manager will not be able to distinguish. Here, reconstituted motivation as I discussed it above, the synthesis of encoded personal attributes and external elements, becomes all-important. This is what creates the *little difference within the same style*, thanks to which the candidate is selected, with the secondary effect of,

10 As a counter-example, see the excellent *Lettres de non-motivation* by Julien Prévieux, Paris, Zones, 2007.

having reprogrammed his subjectivity, the economic actor will no longer be able to differentiate moments of deliberate simulation from other moments. Life is the same on and off stage.

Two coordinates determine the behavior of the living commodity: the competitors and the clients (in the reality show: the other contestants and the viewers). For the competitors, they form a team and are judged according to their ability to evolve internally, to anticipate conflicts, to find solutions. If you are not a “team player” you get a red card immediately. But behind this sociability each participant is looking for an angle to screw the others, knowing that the others are trying to do the same thing. It is possible to form a temporary alliance against a third party, but, once successful, the war of all against all returns, any collective strategy being excluded by definition.

“Who will win? You decide.” The customer is always right. Taken individually, each viewer and each contestant knows he is insignificant. But thanks to the ingenious interactive mechanism, he can imagine himself as a little fingertip of the great invisible hand that decides which commodity lives and which commodity dies. He has freedom of choice. Of course his choice won’t win unless the majority validates it, so he will decide based on the norms that he imagines are shared among his peers. These changing norms are the obsessions of living commodity. She knows that with the first blemish, the first lack, she will be eliminated. Her fate does not depend on the caprice of a master, but on those of the viewers. If things go badly, she can’t beg for forgiveness, she can only blame her own failure

to seduce. In the horizontal system of servitude, Big Brother is other people. But he is also yourself, depending on the situation. Because, let's not forget, there is no ontological split between commodity and customer. Since each plays both roles in turn, he can find compensation for the torment of the sale in the purchase. So the system is in equilibrium. Incidentally, each has his feverish role, each participant having forgotten that the rule of the game has been defined by others, that the actual conditions leave no room for maneuvering and that the final result is of no importance: the result is nothing, the process is everything. The important thing is to participate. In any case others will enjoy the real benefits.

Nothing more accurately characterizes the living commodity than the relation she maintains with her own language and body.<sup>11</sup> The words exchanged on reality TV shows *don't mean anything* in both senses of the phrase.<sup>12</sup> *Small talk* is part of the packaging and functions to duplicate and prove conformity to social norms. Of course it will be politically correct, allowing itself a few well-calculated deviations so as to appear different without actually breaking with the dominant code. What language is to sound, the body is to the image. Living commodities must seem very fresh; nothing stresses them out more than their sell-by date, and it is not so much health as the appearance of

11 The idea has been amusingly discussed by Tiqqun, *Théorie de la jeune-fille*, Paris, Mille et une nuits, 2001. [English edition: *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*. Semiotext(e): 2012.]

12 [Vouloir dire means to mean and to want to mean or express. —Tr.]

vitality and enthusiasm that they strive for in a fusion of sports, pharmaceuticals, and cosmetics. That imperfect collection of organs, the body, to respond to need, should be *customized* by the use of spare parts. In the US a reality TV show airs live plastic surgery operations, at the end of which the public decides which remodeled creature is the biggest success. Ultimately, the value of the living commodity's body will be determined by the *seduction-operation* to which sexual exchange is reduced. Sexual consummation properly speaking is little more than an optional postlude.

Ultimately, reality TV is a perfect illustration of the great universal market, in that everything unfolds under the watchful eye of the cameras. The opposition to the "invasions of privacy" embodied in these programs are antediluvian. As has been recently stated by the German head of the office of personal data protection: "It is difficult to protect something that has been so willingly abandoned by those concerned." Reality TV is at work in the streets, offices, and shops. Smile, you're on camera. At the risk of being suspected of faking, the living commodity must make clear that she has nothing to hide. Her traceability is at the public's disposal. *Transparency*, so dear to her, is that of the shop window. Moreover, video surveillance responds to her pressing need for security. She truly wants to offer zero defects, but on condition of having zero risk, and with zero tolerance for anyone seeking to abuse her rather than use her. In the scripted reality of the market, every negative act is recorded and punished, the greater social harmony being guaranteed by the deterrence provided by the means of control.



In Hegelian-inspired philosophy, self-consciousness is inseparable from the struggle for recognition. Initially, inequality and otherness dominate, and gradually equality and reciprocity are established among individuals as they become conscious of each other and thus of themselves. For living commodities, precisely the opposite takes place. In the beginning, they are all equal. Equal opportunity allows them to offer themselves on the supermarket shelves without regard to sex, nationality, or background. After that, it's everyone for themselves. As soon as the customers enter, the merciless battle for difference begins. The living commodity is ready to do anything to attract attention, for *her* to be identified, purchased, and consumed as opposed to the others. For if all are called, few are chosen. At the end of the competitive struggle, inequality reigns. It is the dialectic of the winner and the loser. But identification is not recognition; the chosen commodity has a premonition that its celebrity will be fleeting and disappointing. Quickly she falls back into the undifferentiated mass of fifteen-minute stars and everything starts over again. Here is why behind her smile a deep sadness is concealed. There are no happy commodities.

Of course, reality TV is but an allegory *representing* the abstract ideal of the market. But for all that, it's not a fiction that can be distinguished from lived reality because its goal is to dissolve the difference between fiction and reality. Moreover, the reality of the market is the victory march of a fiction. If ultimately the living commodity is an impossibility, everything is organized so that the simulation of this impossibility rules the

behavior of the actors in the market. What is really lived in this drama is the new form of suffering that it produces: the inferiority complex created by competition, the guilt of not being able to sell yourself, the shame at not being free of faults, the anxiety of not meeting demands. So that what was inherent in motivation is inverted into a lack.

# III

## THE COMPANY WANTS WHAT'S BEST FOR YOU (DON'T GIVE IT TO THEM)

Brian: *You're all individuals!*

The crowd: *We're all individuals!*

Brian: *You're all different!*

The crowd: *Yes, we're all different!*

One lonely voice: *I'm not.*

—Monty Python

When we think about motivation today, everyone immediately thinks of the world of work, of the motivation of the workforce. This is a relatively new phenomenon. One need only consult the published works on the topic to learn that not long ago, research focused on troubled children, competitive sports, and soldiers in combat. It is certainly not surprising that the techniques developed there have been transferred to business, because motivation has taken on a pedagogic function (teaching the limits of the entrepreneurial project to big kids who are more or less retarded), since it is a competitive arena (workers against each other and against other companies), and since it is structured as a war of conquest (thus the obsession with “mobilization” and “strategy”). But how did we get here, to the point where *motivation* has suddenly become the question upon which the future of World Trade, Inc. rests?

To be able to respond to this question we need to examine the previous phase of industrial development, which is generally referred to as Taylorism. It was to explicitly mitigate the lack of motivation that Frederick Winslow Taylor created the system that bears his name. To the question of whether he could count on the love of his workers to do a good job, Taylor and every economist along with him responded with a categorical *no*. He writes,

The natural laziness of men is serious, but by far the greatest evil from which both workmen and employers are suffering is the *systematic soldiering* which is almost universal under all of the ordinary schemes of management and which results from a careful study on the part of the workmen of what will promote their best interests.

The entire so-called scientific organization of labor (which so pleased Lenin) begins with this postulate. You have to force people to work despite themselves. Thus you have to make it so that the productive process is rendered independent from the subjective engagement of its operators. How? By externalizing their thought with technology and organization. The “rationalization” of tasks is the expropriation of the initiative of the workers (recall in psychoanalysis “rationalization” is the justification of an action for which the real ends are unstated). In the Taylorist factory the machines are rational and the individuals mechanized. They are only there to complete the tasks they have been assigned by the plan and to meet the production standards. The employment contract is an abdication of individual will through

which the employee fully surrenders to the organization. The results are the conditions immortalized in Chaplin's film *Modern Times*. In this pyramidal organization enormous amounts of energy are devoted to controlling the workers. It must be ensured that the workers do the job assigned to them, but it is also crucial to see to it that *they do not seize the slightest initiative*, because this would upset the standards set by the planners. As much as the mechanization of roles, it is these surveillance functions that characterize Taylorism, the omnipresence of little bosses behind your back, "supervisors" as they are called, the sense of this word referring more to maniacal mastery than mastery of an art.<sup>13</sup>

A trick of rationalizing reason caused this system to malfunction. Born of (founded on, no doubt) the supposed indifference of the worker toward his task, Taylorism aims to increase this indifference to a tremendous extent. The labor power the worker provides to his boss as established in the employment contract is the mechanical repetition of a certain number of movements and nothing more. The reason that he consents to this servitude is purely instrumental: to get his monthly paycheck. Wages and salary are not "just compensation" for the value and quality of the work performed, but more like damages paid for the time lost at the factory. In this way the worker comes to maintain the same purely amoral relationship to his work as the capitalist himself! For each of them, work is only

13 [Agents de maîtrise, literally "mastery agent" is the French name for a low-level supervisor; Paoli uses the double meaning of "mastery" to subvert the common sense of the term. -Tr.]

a means, unimportant in itself, whose end is money. However, this state of affairs has had a double consequence that the Taylorists did not predict. On the one hand, there was no reason until then to bother with finding ways to get around captive time. But absenteeism, slow-downs, theft, and sabotage multiplied, resulting in substantial losses to industry. On the other hand, from the moment that wage demands **were considered as a compensation for one's spoilt life**, they departed from the realism of management and turned a deaf ear to their arguments. The only thing taken into account to determine salary increases was the current dynamic of power. For this reason the unions, which continued to negotiate the division of wealth from management's point of view, found themselves regularly rejected by their base, which was unconcerned with this sort of calculation. This is how, in the 1970s, the equilibrium between the bosses and the unions, which was at the core of Taylorist organization, ceased to function.

This history is relatively well known. But there is another less obvious and more important aspect that became clear at this moment: Taylorism has never been anything but a capitalist utopia, a rationalizing fantasy. One has to remember the context in which this system was introduced, the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the dominant notion was that the blind and savage masses needed to be directed and ordered around by omniscient guides. The scientific organization of work is the twin sister of political dictatorship. The two were then seen as indispensable if one was to avoid having the estab-

lished order overturned by the masses. Incidentally, they share this vision, “the engineering of souls,” with their adversaries. Long has the far left fantasized that capitalism necessarily leads to fascism; longer still has it seen Taylorism as the ultimate stage of exploitation.

But this theory is false. It is false for this reason: because a bureaucratic organization, no matter how scientific, has never been able to substitute itself for the participation of its employees. The man-machine is just a rationalist myth, quite simply because work can't be programmed like a computer. Even in the most mechanical and routine production process there are breakdowns and unknowns that require initiative and decision-making. And even in a modestly-sized firm, management cannot have the omniscience and the speed necessary to react to even the smallest surprise. What worker disobedience negatively and in spite of itself made the employers understand was that the health of a company doesn't only depend on the big ideas and strategies from the highest level, but more subtly on many small changes and improvements made daily by the whole work force at all levels of the company. If these are lacking, everything falls apart. In passing, we should add that the workers undertake these micro-initiatives not because they love a job well done, but because they want to simplify their work. Even Adam Smith tells that in the time of the first steam-powered machines, a child laborer hired to open and close a valve figured out that in attaching it to another part of the machine, it would function on its own, *allowing him time to play with his friends.*

Then industry critiqued its own methods and declared, as it were, “war on Taylor.” What resulted was “the new spirit of capitalism” which has been brilliantly analyzed by Boltanski and Chiapello. Another trick of reason made this possible. Since the workers were required to check their minds at the door, logically they looked for ways to use their minds outside of the working day. This is how “free time” became a central focus of their existence (the term itself signifies that work is radically opposed to freedom). Logically the skills that were not used during “captive time” sought an outlet in recreation, culture, sports, or tourism. Of course, these sectors were first and foremost new markets. The free time consumed by some is the work of others. But you can’t reduce it to this aspect alone. For what the workers brought to light through the consumption of commodities (and in other ways) is a multiplicity of desires, areas of interest, the will to engagement, the spirit of initiative, in short an entire field of motivation that couldn’t help but attract the attention of the managers. So these animated objects do have a soul! Having become visible and identifiable, this field was thus exploitable. It’s a bit like the phenomenon of artists squatting in a vacant factory that nobody wants, creating value there that is then taken by investors. All of these personal resources whose practical application (or at least the desire for it) is outside work must be recaptured. On the one hand this assumes the abandonment of Taylorism, reorganizing the entire system, and on the other, reforming the workers’ mentality in order to create an open border between work and free time.



This transformation is even more necessary to companies since other concurrent elements have disrupted this order.

It is common knowledge that the progress of robotics and digitization have made superfluous those workers whose jobs are purely mechanical. In his time Henry Ford was fond of saying that to make a Model T you needed “949 able-bodied men, the rest could be done by 670 legless men, 2637 one-legged men, 715 one-armed men, 2 armless men and 10 blind men.” From then on, robots could effectively be substituted for the arms and legs of the humans. Robots are more reliable, faster, cheaper, and never go on strike. Since men had been reduced to the state of men-machines, it was logical to replace them as soon as it became possible by actual machines. And in the process of demotivation, one should not fail to recognize the role played by the *a posteriori* revelation of this humiliating condition. I am not talking about the assembly line where it was obvious, but jobs where the workers are a bit less dispossessed of their mind. The day an ATM replaces five bank employees, they have to face the facts: they were nothing more than distributors of cash five times less efficient than an ATM.

One could deduce from this that industry is trending towards a system in which work will be fully automated, indefinitely delivering so-called goods and services without human intervention and thus having definitively resolved the question of motivation. Of course, two small problems would remain. The first is ethical and so doesn't concern entrepreneurs. What should happen to the surplus of humanity who are unemployed

and deprived of resources? Though they claim to be neoliberals, employers hastily pass this baby off to the state, while incidentally benefiting from tax incentives that promise to create jobs. Evidently this promise is empty, as their function is really to make money and not create employment opportunities. The second problem concerns employers more. As Henry Ford (him again) said, cars don't buy cars. Nor do robots. The money that one takes out of the pockets of ex-workers is the same money that they use to buy products. This is always the weak link in the infinite chain of the multiplication of capital: at any given moment it is essential that a sufficient number of people are making purchases, requiring them to be solvent. But this question, as crucial as it is, is not my focus here.

What is important here is that in fact, the notion that profit can be created through entirely automated production is false, *even if there are enough solvent consumers* (for example by the introduction of the “guaranteed income” called for by some leftists and even by the neoliberal Milton Friedman). In the *Manifesto of the Happy Unemployed*, we cite Aristotle (“if each tool could execute its proper function, the factory owner wouldn't need assistants nor the master slaves”) and we added:

Automation has always been a dream of humanity. Today the dream has become a reality, but it has taken shape as a nightmare for everyone because social relations have not evolved as quickly as technology.<sup>14</sup>

This formulation was, on our part, deliberately naïve. We only

14 *Manifeste des chômeurs heureux, Le chien rouge*, Marseille, 2006.

intended to cast doubt on the motives behind rationalization. With the fantastic technological advances of the last decades, as a result of which not only do robots execute increasingly complex tasks but also build other robots, the old utopia of the land of plenty would seem close at hand. But it remains a utopia as least so long as World Trade, Inc. continues to exist.<sup>15</sup> It is important to understand why.

Machines can endlessly produce (they can also destroy) but they cannot conceive, elaborate, make corrections, integrate discoveries, react to changes, in a word: innovate. Nor can they negotiate, seduce, convince, or lie: in other words, sell. As a result automation can only maintain a fixed level of *reproduction*. A little like traditional agriculture, industry would always deliver the same products in a quantity based on demand (therefore there would no longer be a need to seduce to sell). Of course this would assume that what constitutes “the satisfaction of needs” could have been determined by a consensus and that a corresponding set of products could thereby be defined. But even assuming that this obstacle were removed, the industrial system would then have to be static, in a state of equilibrium, and not continuing to develop. And this would be instant death for World Trade, Inc.

It goes without saying that the goal of what we call, for lack of a better term, the economic system, *is not the satisfaction of needs*. What needs, for that matter? The name of the game is the

15 Whether it is really desirable to be permanently surrounded by robots, and thus be dependent on them, is another question...

infinite growth of capital: out of money more money is made. A director of General Motors once proclaimed in that straightforward manner we love about US-americans, “Our business is not to make cars, our business is to make money.” Any other factors are only means subordinated to this goal to which the process is subject, not to “laws” but to necessary conditions. If capital doesn’t grow, it shrinks. Stability is its enemy. How does a company that is making a profit make a larger one? One option would be to use a portion of its profit to reduce prices, since this will increase purchases and overall revenue. But if it does this, it challenges the competitors to match its prices or even offer lower ones. The approach of relative advantage leads each competitor to “slash prices” in turn, which produces the opposite of the intended effect. Rather than growing, profits will progressively disappear. This was the downward trend of World Trade, Inc. that led Karl Marx to predict a slow but certain death for it. However, not being suicidal by nature, capitalists discovered a different route a long time ago: it is not by lowering prices on existing products but by launching new ones that profits grow rapidly. The first company to introduce a new product gains a clear advantage over its competitors and its profits will follow. But of course this is short-lived: quickly the competition imitates the innovation, competitive advantage is lost and along with it, profits. You have to once again launch a *new* new product. As Orson Welles said in *Confidential Report*, “It is not so difficult to make money, just don’t think about anything else!” As a result, continuous innovation is a necessary condition for

the growth of capital. This is what Schumpeter called “creative destruction.” Certain products and even entire industrial sectors have to be eliminated so that others can appear. Only this ongoing upheaval allows the growth of capital. Habits must be constantly destroyed.

As it happens, the spiral of obsolescence and innovation has accelerated substantially over the last two decades. In addition to the dynamic inherent to the expansion of money there are two other reasons. The first, notoriously, is globalization: competition has become fully international, and capital can desert a sluggish industry in an instant to go to the other side of the world for more promising opportunities. To maintain this restless energy, it always needs new projects to take on.

The second is the decline of new markets. The Taylorist mode of organization suited the era of mass production, when the same car was made for millions of motorists. Today the possibilities for expansion are not unlimited. Entrepreneurs are forced to find the “little difference” that separates them from the competition, to create ranges of “personalized” products, targeting small segments of buyers and finding new ones each season. This means that with regards to work, the focus is no longer on reproduction but on the frantic search for innovation.

Adding to this, the formula determining the price of a product has undergone a kind of inversion of polarity. In the past the price of a commodity was the result of the sum of the costs of production and distribution (increased by the profit margin, of course). Today it’s the opposite: you determine the

price you need to sell at to be competitive, and then shape the costs to reach this goal. This is the meaning of the phrase “the market dictates its rule.” If “the Koreans” sell a product for 50 Euros, “we” have to sell it for no more than 49.99 Euros. “We” have to reduce our costs to make sure we do not exceed this strict limit. Now, the reduction of labor costs very much implies reducing salaries, but also “cutting back” positions not directly involved with production, and flattening the hierarchical pyramid. This implies that the workers, even though their salaries are being reduced, have to take over the jobs once assigned to supervisors, and, for example, assess their own work.

Let’s return to the myth of complete automation. I mention it because it reveals *a contrario* what is at stake in the new organization of work. It goes without saying that the “rationalization” of business has as its goal to create economies of scale, and not to relieve workers from monotonous work. It is also a matter of reducing costs to get an upper hand on international competition. But this goal also requires that new markets be opened, new products constantly be developed, and so many new campaigns be undertaken. Much more than in traditional industry, this approach, centered on permanent innovation, depends on a wide range of initiatives taken by entire firms. And that is why it is wrong to believe that work is on its way out. What is trending downward is mechanical tasks, but this is in order to clear the way for tasks of active participation. In other words, the more reproduction is automated, the more the remaining human labor has a prominent role in the global

process, a role that is not quantitative, of course, but qualitative. Far fewer workers are employed, but for those who are, working means total mobilization.

As opposed to the Taylorist system, which exempted workers from needing to use their brain, the corporation no longer needs muscles (for which it has robots) but has a vital need for brains. Even the operators of call centers, these specialized workers of digital society, must be committed to their jobs, which means knowing how to simulate active engagement. Incidentally, the call center clearly illustrates the residual core of human participation necessary once everything has been automated and the user finds himself completely overwhelmed by the array of technology he is supposed to master. In a terrific scene from the film *Attention danger travail*, you see a minor functionary—I mean a coordinator—continually instructing his subordinates—sorry, his colleagues—to “smile into the phone!” They are paid to smile—not to please the boss, but to “satisfy the customer.” Here is another consequence of the previously discussed inversion of polarity: the worker is no longer supposed to submit to the commands of the hierarchy, but to the needs of the customer. Naturally, this customer is not you or I, but the abstract figure of general competition. When “the market” imposes its law, there is less need for individual coercion.

All this, according to sociologist Christoph Deutschmann, finally means that Marx was right—despite himself. Marx was wrong to believe that the amount of necessary labor *time* was the substance of value. That is metaphysics. But he was right to

assume that work is the only source of profit to the extent that it is labor and not the “means of production” that is the source of innovation. Deutschmann writes,

It is precisely because the valorization of capital is dependent on the creativity of work as a whole that it doesn't follow a law of value that can be measured by a scientific observer.<sup>16</sup>

The entrepreneur's great idea is nothing if it is not picked up and developed by the set of smaller ideas coming out of those who work for him. Without this, mechanical routine would choke profit. Now, this set is neither quantifiable nor observable, and even less can it be planned. The result is that business strategies focus their attention on intangible phenomena like atmosphere or communication. Bosses know how to play this tune when they praise their “colleagues” for having contributed to the success of the “innovative company,” but they systematically forget them when it comes time to distribute the financial benefits of the innovation. That's when the board of directors grants itself bonuses and stock options for its good ideas. Here, the critique holds true, that the employee's wages at base do not compensate her for work, but obedience. Except this obedience is anything but passive.

So it is easy to see why motivation has become the Holy Grail of management. Henceforward, management's image of the worker is the opposite of the Taylorist prejudices of the past.

<sup>16</sup> Christoph Deutschmann, *Die Verheißung des absoluten Reichtums*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt, 1999.



This image even shows a resolutely optimistic conception of human nature. Motivation, according to the technical literature, is a

source of energy that each individual carries within. Nobody works just to eat. One expects more from one's personal life, for example the possibility of realizing a personal project, or having influence or power.<sup>17</sup>

One will immediately note that specific motives are carefully chosen here. Here the intrinsic desires for solidarity or tranquility that almost everyone has within them (at least one might presume) aren't taken into account. They don't generate profit. And management's precise mission is to transform the potential energy of motivation into kinetic energy that benefits the company.

Here is where the problem starts. Because somewhere along the way this energy is lost. And the worst thing about it is that it dissipates not among the bad workers but the good ones. The bad employees, having already started out as non-motivated, cannot be *demotivated*. In order to be disappointed, you need to have had hope beforehand. The demotivated are those who want to use their talent but are unable to. For example, a worker who is so committed to quality that he works too slowly to produce the quantity expected of him. Or those who were loyal to the "spirit of the company" so long as it offered security and stability. Now that these old-fashioned motives have been replaced by risk and mobility, they feel deceived and no longer

17 This is an excerpt from a German pamphlet on motivation consulting.

have their hearts in it. According to a behavior specialist, when demotivation hits a company, “the best go first”, because they have an easier time finding a job elsewhere. As a result only the sub-par employees stay behind. And an industrial psychologist suggests, “When workers put on the brakes, their job requires twice as much energy.” Ultimately, the specialists warn, demotivation can lead to “underground or even open revolt.”

Let’s take a moment here to pay homage to those who have gone missing. Nobody will deny that in many professional arenas the level of quality and competence has declined in recent years. In general, people hold the education system or the loss of values responsible. But we can suggest another hypothesis. Let’s look at a sector where this degeneration is common knowledge: politics. An objective measure is even possible: it will suffice to compare the debates between politicians from a century, fifty, and thirty years ago to one from 2007 for example, between the Mother-of-four-children and the Real-man-who’s-successful-and-gets-things-done to analyze not their content but their form: how many adjectives, how many verbs were used, what verb tenses, what figures of speech? The impoverishment of language of these professional orators who graduated from the best schools of the *République* is mathematically demonstrable and clearly indicates the poverty of their thought as well. The reason is not so mysterious. Not only is the disrepute typical to the exercise of their duties multiplied thanks to rating systems and public relations teams, but their real power is gradually being reduced to almost nothing. As soon as

a decision becomes important, it is externalized, delegated to technocrats and lobbyists, and the elected puppet's only charge is to communicate it on TV. Under these circumstances it is clear that someone who is gifted in debate, moved by a cause, or even striving for real power will scrupulously avoid a political career, leaving those positions to those who can do nothing else, or worse, to those who have it out for the world.

Certainly it is a waste of time to make fun of political pedantry. But it is no different elsewhere, in the press for example. A journalist looking to do detailed interviews, write in-depth articles, have independent ideas and a unique style has no place in the current landscape of journalism. Refusing to abandon his beliefs, he quits the game, leaving the task of keeping us disinformed to the third-rate ninny. He tries to find himself another source of income and makes use of his talent, for example by publishing his investigations on an independent website. One can easily find many examples where the practice of a profession contradicts the true calling. There are well known greats who have disappeared like Alexander Grothendieck, the Rimbaud of mathematics, who completely broke with the scientific community because he did not support their collusion with the state and industry, and instead has meditated in isolation for the past thirty years. But there are many others, anonymous and unknown. A brilliant genetics researcher whose personal ethics don't allow him to participate in the narrow market approach of his colleagues now writes novels. A kid from a prestigious university who had a shining future made a tactical retreat into

unemployment. A promising trader puts himself on the sidelines, happy to publish his analyses for other bankers. When I asked him why he did it, he said: “the stock market is a semi-criminal activity, it’s for my own safety that I have distanced myself, but it’s also a voluntary exit—my life is no longer dictated by the interests of the company.”

My thesis is that the cream of the crop is spontaneously skimming itself, leaving the whey to rise to the top of organizations. As Yeats (a visionary poet) predicted in 1921: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” Having discovered that the sub-systems in which they operate are no longer reformable, those who are destined to occupy positions of power act according to this principle: . If you can’t overturn it, drop it. Of course these new conscientious objectors have not become dropouts, begging for a living on the road. They simply find socio-professional niches for themselves that allow them to be comfortable without having to expose their real talents. At one time I had the idea of making public this invisible conspiracy by taking account, with the approval of the individuals involved, of the resources withheld from World Trade, Inc. and by describing their reasons for doing so. Respect for the silence most of them had chosen dissuaded me from doing so. You have to see here that it’s not an articulated movement but a multitude of decisions made for purely personal reasons. I assert, however, that this has had a remarkable impact on the self-destructive evolution of the system—for the mediocre careerists who remain are making more and more erratic de-

cisions. Moreover, this phenomenon is reinforced by another factor: those who find themselves at the bottom levels of an organization (because they don't have the means to do otherwise) experience a lack of emulation brought on by the absence of exemplary people who might help them. This is what psychologists call a "situational motivation deficit."

Antidotes are needed. It is surprising to observe how quickly and easily the self-proclaimed management consultants managed to come on the scene: in other words how they convinced an otherwise prudent management to squander money on their services. It is a clear sign of the deep disarray that reigns here, and also of how vitally necessary it is to win the battle of motivation.

We remember how, in the 90s, droves of charlatans took modernist bosses for large sums in the form of ostentatious spending, gifts, and entertainment with the aim of making their "colleagues" loyal to the company. For example a software company where a friend of mine worked took its workers on a surprise getaway. Though she was ready for anything, she was surprised to see the plane land on an ice floe in the Arctic Circle where a candlelit dinner was waiting for them, served on tables carved from ice. But the golden age of bacchanalian spending has long passed. Such compromises on the economy of scale produced no tangible results. What they learned was that little gifts do nothing to change the company culture on the daily level. They can even be interpreted as an awkward justification.

When this did not work, other consultants endeavored to work directly on the psychology of the employees. This was the era of meditation, autogenic training, role-playing, and other interactive mumbo jumbo. One consultant proclaimed “You take a step forward when you look at the situation positively” (this forward step reminds us of the donkey in the prologue...). The staff was swamped with precepts like: Don’t say: “I don’t understand”; say: “I don’t have enough information.” In fact, all of these techniques are more or less copied directly from the tired old approach of the chemist Emile Coué which consisted of repeating twenty times before he went to bed the phrase, “I am getting better and better every day in every way.” Contrary to popular opinion, one should not underestimate the power of self-suggestion. This approach makes perfect sense for a boxer who gets in the ring, saying, “I am invincible, I will pulverize my opponent, he can do nothing to hurt me.” If he doesn’t believe this, he will be afraid and make himself more vulnerable to his opponent. But administered by others and for a goal that is foreign to the individual, these methods are more reminiscent of reeducation as it was practiced in Mao’s China. One would seriously doubt that these techniques would have any effect on a normal person. In fact, it might be the reverse: psychologists have discovered what they call an “overjustification effect”<sup>18</sup> in which too much externally provided motivation kills motivation. A person realizes that he is being rewarded for performing a task he once did willingly. He then revises his judgment of

18 [*effet de corruption* in French —Tr.]

its value in thinking: if I have to be rewarded, it's probably not a pleasant thing to do. Which is yet more evidence, as doctors categorically affirm: positive thinking makes you sick!

So they had to face the facts: you can't motivate someone against their will. Or, as one of my professors once said about me, you can lead a donkey to water, but you can't make it drink. In desperation, the managers have turned toward a new wave of consultants who propose that the obstacles to motivation lie in the structure of the company itself and that these obstacles must be eliminated. It is not the worker that is the issue but the impersonal atmosphere, the forms of communication, the attitude of management. Everything has to be more humane, more sexy. But this cool new look quickly butts heads with the nasty "exterior constraints" of the market, whose "inescapability" was precisely the source of demotivation. Every strategy that begins with circumstantial issues fixable with smart management tactics is doomed to fail. First of all because they make the exterior pressures into an abstraction: a "more human" company has no future in an inhuman system. For one of them to make true reforms, everyone else would have to do the same thing, and all over the world. Next, because demotivation is not an accident. It is a systematic phenomenon produced by the double constraint to which all workers are subject. If, as they are encouraged to do, they act according to their own ideas, they quickly violate the rules of the current world order. If they submit to this order, they betray their creative capacities.

The result is reported by a recent Gallup poll about German workers: 18% say they have no emotional tie to their employer, 70% say they limit this tie to the absolute minimum, 88% state they feel no obligation to their boss, 46% admit that privately they have given up. I don't have the figures for France but every indication suggests that they are similar. As we all know, the MEDEF (Movement of the Enterprises of France) claims to be frequently misunderstood by public opinion, and for good reason. You have to understand the employer's point of view. Of course, to understand doesn't mean to justify their perspective or to sympathize with them. When he swears that he doesn't want to compel unemployed workers who lack qualifications and motivation to labor, he is being honest. This is what the state wants. Every entrepreneur is looking for competent, dynamic and motivated workers, because the market, his God, demands it through the intercession of the shareholders. The forcing of the overall job market into precariousness, temporary employment contracts (CDD in France), and the obsessive fear of layoffs are only means to reach this end, but they are not sufficient in themselves. Far from encouraging motivation, the tenuous job market can provoke a reaction of massive refusal. Once again the old adage proves to be true: you can make people work, but not work well.

Added to this is the escalation in managerial hot air about "excellence" and "zero tolerance for error" that can only engender an increase in fraud and deception. If the goal is unattainable, act like you have already reached it. From the top to the



bottom of the organization, it's faking at every level. And obviously, even motivation is faked. This state of affairs has deadly consequences for the longevity of the system: in the absence of reliable information offered in good faith, no strategy is possible. The little Clausewitzes of industry are now working on new elixirs, new organizational myths that they dream can make us, finally, love exploitation. We wager that they won't find any.

# IV THE WORK DRUG

*I don't want to do what I want.*

*It would be more than enough to want  
what I do!*

—Thomas Kapielski

The “love of work” that Paul Lafargue denounces in his *Right To Be Lazy*, this “moribund passion for work that pushes one’s vital forces and those of his children to the breaking point”—today this “strange madness” is a scientifically established fact. Experts agree: a work addiction exists that in its form, symptoms, progression, and effects is the same as drug or alcohol dependence. A growing number of employees “get wasted” on the job and burn their vital energy to the point of becoming sick or even dying—the most striking example being *karoshi* (death by work), which claims twenty thousand victims a year in Japan.

I have to make a preliminary remark here that in this arena, like in so many others, there is a French exception. In Anglo-Saxon countries “workaholism” is treated as a serious problem that has been researched and analyzed in detail. This is also true in Germany, where it is called *Arbeitssucht*. This is not the case in France, where the phenomenon is trivialized, not only by health and safety officers but more generally by the collective consciousness. In general the French look mockingly and condescendingly at those unfortunate countries where the cult of work reigns; they are proud of their culture which, in

so many of its films and songs, glorifies laziness and living the good life. If one knows somebody hooked on “the work drug” it will be seen as an atypical case, the exception that confirms the rule. But if one considers the real conditions that reign within companies, and the way in which employees invest themselves in them, there really isn’t much difference between France, third in the world in the rate of hourly production, and other industrialized countries. What is expressed on the symbolic level, in folklore, does not match up with reality. So it is important to be skeptical about how people understand their own relationship to work. There are notorious slackers who swear they are overloaded with work, and beasts of burden who claim that the less they do, the better they feel. You could say that the former are more common in the northern latitudes and latter in the Latin countries. But this is beside the point. The dependence on work doesn’t come from national or individual character; it stems from a pathological phenomenon that is a *socially produced* sickness. Now, since the social conditions in France are the same as everywhere else, there is every reason to believe that they produce similar effects on the individuals who live there. It is even likely that the affirmation of the “value of laziness” has as its purpose to repress reality and, as a result, to reinforce it. In every town in America and Germany “Workaholics Anonymous” groups meet to find a way, together, to detoxify themselves from work. This does not exist in France, to my knowledge. On the other hand, everyone knows that the French are the biggest consumers of tranquilizers and anti-

depressants, which may explain this phenomenon. One dependency supports another.

One consequence of all this is that the French language has no word to characterize the thing. *Dépendance* has a sense of abstract causality that could be misconstrued. The Anglicism *workaholic* indicates that the harm is a foreign import. Scientists talk about *ergomanie* but rarely. The Québécois, always more inventive, call it *boulomanie*, a word that conveniently evokes bulimia, but the expression has not crossed the Atlantic.<sup>19</sup> Addiction is also used. Until now I have avoided using yet another Anglicism, but the etymology of the word has convinced me to adopt it. In fact, in the Middle Ages, addiction was a decree declared by a tribunal, obliging the insolvent debtor to reimburse his lender by his work. Beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, in the English language the word meant the contractual obligation of an apprentice to his master. It was only gradually that addiction evolved into its current meaning; mania, the indulging in morally reprehensible passions. Thus the word conserves the memory of a primordial act of constraint, which has since been internalized in a process by which *suffering is made tolerable by making it worse*. Moreover, as opposed to dependency, which is always dependency *on something*, addiction is a generic term, a structural matrix shared by diverse expressions that include toxicological dependency, compulsive consumption, bulimia, etc.

19 [Ergomanie is a French euphemism for workaholism that is nearly as ambiguous as *dependence*, dependency, while the Canadian *boulomanie* stems from the widely-used slang for work, *boulot*. –Tr.]

It goes without saying that the recognition of addiction to work would pose many problems. Beginning with the fact that while a doctor can tell an alcoholic to stop drinking altogether, it's more difficult to tell a *boulomaniac* to stop working altogether! For that matter, if this addiction is recognized as an occupational disorder, businesses would have to indemnify the victims, something they would refuse with their every last bit of energy. So chronic overexertion is listed, like alcoholism, in the category of "personal problems" not implicating the employer. Yet it is obvious that the rapid increase in sickness resulting from overwork is directly correlated to the ever-increasing pressure placed on employees within the company. If the number of sick days taken is in free fall, it is not because the workers are healthier, but rather that even when they are sick they opt not to, out of fear of dismissal, recover at home in bed. Consequently, mental disorders are skyrocketing. And to speak only to professionally recognized disorders, the most prevalent among them today are "musculo-skeletal." Symptoms include chronic joint pain, particularly back pain, often combined with depression or stress. Though women and people who work all day on the computer are the most affected, no professional category escapes these symptoms. And currently there is no known effective treatment. As a result the German office of occupational health counsels doctors to inform their patients of the normality of their ailments, the priority of treatment being to "to reduce recourse to sick pay insurance claims and to favor the return to work." In a word: An employee who knows s/he is under stress must learn to suffer in silence.

Research papers all agree that these health problems are induced by psychosocial factors stemming from work, as for example “the subjective reception of orders and supervision.” In France, the Agency for the Improvement of Working Conditions (ANACT) makes the point even more clearly: joint pain appears “when the meaning of certain movements is no longer felt” by the operator. Musculo-skeletal pain is, and this is still according to ANACT, *a malady that stems from meaningless gestures*. In this way the senselessness of work, something that some still have their doubts about, is presently established by these figures: this problem is growing at a rate of 20% per year overall and as much as 50% in the service sector. Taking preventive measures would involve not only calling the organization of work into question, but first questioning its very meaning, something the relevant authorities will obviously be unwilling to do. Instead of this, they are currently working on finding an appropriate drug that allows workers to withstand the pressures of their environment. Here as elsewhere the reigning principle is: when the environment becomes harmful to people, don’t transform the environment; make people adapt to it.

Obviously, the issues caused by over-working aren’t just personal problems, but are caused by the social environment. But, one might ask, why talk about addiction when it is outside pressure that is the cause? Holger Heide, a socioeconomist who has researched overwork in Germany and Korea for twenty years, responds: external constraint doesn’t explain everything.<sup>20</sup>

20 Holger Heide, *Massenphänomen Arbeitssucht*, Atlantik, Bremen, 2002.

It is always accompanied by an internal constraint that is experienced as *irresistible*—and everything lies in the ambivalence of that word: irresistible is that which one cannot resist by force, that which one is attracted to and seduced by. Here we rediscover the old question of voluntary servitude in new terms: the intersection of social and psychological factors. For ages this has been the subject of a debate made pointless by specialists' blinders. One will reproach psychological interpretations for eluding the social question, while the other suspects the social interpretation is but a resistance to psychological questions. But this absolute split between an exterior and an interior is only a narrow view of the mind, one of the dualisms in which Western thought gets trapped. There is no doubt that exterior pressure, in order to be endured by the individual, has to be internalized. This internalization, according to Heide, is not static, but a dynamic process, a spiral of habituation and raising of the stakes, and it has major psychosomatic consequences. Paul Lafargue was right. Remember that the scandal provoked by his book *The Right To Be Lazy*<sup>21</sup> didn't only result from his questioning of the work dogma. What angered everyone, including the Marxists, was that he didn't simply portray the proletariat as victims of capitalism, but claimed that their "extravagant enthusiasm" also played a role in their poverty.

The drama of addiction has a trivial beginning. The employee wants to prove that he is at the top of his game, that he

21 Engels wanted to prevent its publication in German, arguing: "that's going too far, even for the French," and Kautsky falsified the translation.

is like the guy described in his resume, efficient, tough, taking great initiative. He is recognized for this, which makes him do more. The results give him a “high” which goes to his head. But over time these endorphin rushes become less frequent and shorter. Tasks pile up while his energy wanes. He begins to repress his fear of not being at the top of his game and starts making excuses. At the same time his family and friends complain that he is not available to them, which he experiences as an additional pressure, and which reinforces the feeling that the world is conspiring to prevent him from fulfilling his mission. He becomes increasingly irritated, especially with the other employees who he sees as obstacles to his success (hell is other workers). To escape the idea that he is being squeezed like a lemon, he presses his colleagues, and even harasses them. Soon, the first physical symptoms appear: hypertension, tinnitus, stomach pain. But his doctor treats them as so many accidents having nothing to do with his lifestyle. So he goes on, even increasing his effort to prove that he is not slowing down, that he is irreplaceable in his position, that he can step up his game. There is plenty of fresher human material out there, watching for the slightest sign of weakness and ready to push him out the door. Now he takes drugs: stimulants in the morning, sedatives in the evening. His private life is a total disaster. All he has left is the office, where he can apply himself with increasing aggressiveness. As for the end of his career, it could be a heart attack or suicide.

Addiction to work is widespread in middle and upper management. There is nothing surprising about this: like all



drugs, work hooks all the better when it provokes strong sensations. The success of a public takeover bid or a risky investment stimulates more adrenaline than selling plane tickets or drawing up an accounting report. But the more powerful the sensation, the more relentless the spiral of addiction and need. This explains why many people who seem to be, according to the prevailing criteria, “successful in their lives” are permanently frustrated, embittered, exhausted. And they even exhibit jealousy toward those who are at the bottom of the social ladder, the unemployed who don’t do a damn thing all day. Lafargue’s era, in which the bourgeoisie, if we are to believe it, engaged “in frantic orgies filled with gluttony and syphilitic debauchery” is over. Only Hollywood stars indulge themselves in this way anymore, perhaps along with a few Russian magnates or an emir from Qatar. The rest of them shoot up abstractions. And it is precisely this abstract character of their wealth that *makes junkies out of* the economic elite. A moment comes when one has had enough of top models, caviar, and mega yachts, those floating castles for billionaires, but one can never have too many stock options and hedge funds.

You shouldn’t think, however, that this phenomenon only concerns the upper class. If it is currently undergoing a rapid expansion, it is because it has reached the employees who are under the new organization of work referred to in the preceding chapter: the innovators, the creative types, the flex-timers, those who are not subject to the authority of a boss but to the pressure of a team and whose work time is not strictly scheduled.

Motivation being an essential part of their job description, there is a tendency, when they end up falling behind, to make up for it somehow. Of course this sector is in the minority (just like the “labor aristocracy” in the era of Taylorism) and will probably remain so for some time. But this is the dynamic core of the workforce, pulling everyone else along.

Another high-risk group is made up of the rapidly expanding contingent of “independent” workers (for example, in the software, design, and cultural sectors), who are dependent on short-term assignments, paid in fees, and always having to be rehired. No contract protects them from the threatening competition of their peers and so they do not have the leisure to relax. And being “their own bosses,” they have to check their own work; and should they then have to punish themselves, they wind up with a permanent bad conscience. Their superego is not a father-boss figure, but something much more merciless: the market. Equally affected are the employees for whom work evokes constant fear. Fear of the boss’s demands, of bullying by their co-workers (druggies are the most asocial people there are), fear of performing inadequately, of being laid off; in the end, and above all, fear of being afraid. And they try to escape this unbearable reality by working more. They too, Heide writes, “burn their vital energy.”

The more monotonous and passive it is, the less likely the work is to become a “drug.” But in that case it offers less social recognition, and, more importantly, is not as well paid as addictive work. The latter has a power of attraction. Of course it

is tempting to think: “I should quit this lousy job, do something interesting and make a good living instead,” misunderstanding or ignoring the price that is to be paid for this choice. Moreover, those individuals who, since they’ve been in school, have been formatted to fulfill the demands of the market, trained to participate, to take the initiative, to sell themselves, and who still find themselves under-employed in jobs that provide no real satisfaction, are often prepared to sacrifice anything to be recognized for their abilities. They too can be affected by addiction, this time, in the form of a *lack*. We all know a new species is proliferating in the corporate world: the intern. Overworked, he has to do what the salaried workers refuse to do, and do it passionately, paid only with the promise that at the end of his internship there may a job for him. Even if he is disappointed in the end (which happens often) he tells himself that at least his worth was acknowledged for a short moment and that he had gained professional experience. And then he rushes toward a new internship.

The withdrawal symptoms are particularly manifest in a specific group: the unemployed who have lost a job to which they were addicted. Suddenly they fall into an abyss. They don’t know what to do anymore. They feel unwanted. The time that they now have to do what they like fills them with ennui. In the course of discussions led by the Happy Unemployed<sup>22</sup> we have been able to determine that the suffering caused by the lack of work is not proportionate with unemployment benefits.

22 [Also Glücklichen Arbeitslosen: informal German organization for the unemployed, launched in 1996 —Tr.]

Those for whom these are small certainly suffer from a lack of money. But often the job they have lost (or to which they were headed) was not satisfying enough that they feel any nostalgia. It is different for those who, despite receiving better compensation, cannot get over their loss of social status. They experience unemployment as going cold turkey. Beyond the market, their families, their friends, and the media never stop talking about their disenfranchisement or, worse, stigmatize them. Yes, they lack work, but like a junkie lacks junk! And yet, nobody is going to demonstrate in the streets to demand “heroin for everyone.” We often hear that half the population works itself to death, the other half is bored to death. There is another way to express it: half the world has gotten used to an increasing dose of the work drug, the other half suffers from withdrawal. These are two sides of the same coin. And we will get nowhere if we demand the same dose, equitably shared by all, accompanied by a civic replacement therapy program.

You are likely going to say that I am exaggerating, that I am extrapolating from a few extreme examples. How many work junkies are out there, exactly? There is no possible response to this question, and this is the essential point. There cannot be one because so long as the *boulomaniacs* are still able to work, their habituation is not recognized as a dysfunction. From a medical perspective, an addiction is not established unless it impairs the ability to work. In other words, the problem isn't that one might work oneself to death but that one might lose the ability to do one's job. Using this logic, shooting her-

oin doesn't qualify you as an addict—you have to overdose! So long as the employee sacrifices his private life to the company, overburdens his own workload, never grumbles about transfers, accepts “external constraints” that weigh on him, gives up his “privileges” for fear of being fired, maximizes his performance, and rationalizes it all with his sense of responsibility, his career plans, and his enthusiasm, his case is not the least bit pathological. He is doing exactly what is expected of him. The deviants are the non-addicts or occasional users who wind up being called “allergic to work,” saboteurs of growth, parasites, and agitators who disrupt the flow. In a screening offered by Workaholics Anonymous, the following appear among ten questions:

Do you value your work more than your family or anything else in life? Do you feel entirely responsible for the results of your work? Do you think about work when you are driving, going to sleep, or when other people are talking to you?

Answering yes to these three questions, which would be praised by any employer as a sign of a promising career, is supposed to be sufficient to establish a diagnosis of addiction.

We must conclude that company normalcy is pathogenic. What is the reason for this? Heide again:

Not only does the capitalist system promote addiction, but it lives off of this addiction; it is intrinsically a system of addiction. Capital produces and reproduces need, and does so exponentially, because the absence of limits is what constitutes its essence.

Once more we rediscover the imperative of the multiplication of money that draws everything, people and things, into its ascendant spiral. Addiction is but the manifestation, on the psychosomatic level, of the collision of the infinity of an abstract movement and the natural limits of the living.

To these remarks, one could respond: work can be a drug, so what? This genre of denunciation comes from a conservative or hygienic perspective, right? Isn't it, after all, a rational choice made by an individual to favor seeking immediate pleasure at the cost of his health? To this there are several responses: first of all, everyone knows that a drug is a drug. On the other hand, it is not so common to think about work from the perspective of addiction. Independent of all moral judgment, it is helpful to see to what extent our hypothesis advances the understanding of the social phenomenon. Next, it is one thing to voluntarily decide to take drugs; it's another to be drugged without knowing it. And yet to the extent that the addiction to work is not understood as such, we cannot say that those who fall prey to it made a choice while conscious of the risks. Besides it is not so much a question here of the freedom of individual choice but of the social consequences of those choices. Those who have been around junkies will know what I'm talking about. The problem isn't that they self-destruct but that they often drag down their friends, that they destroy all their relations to feed their habit. This is especially true, in the case we are dealing with here, in which the addiction is supported by the current norm. But above all, we must

express the most serious reservations with regards to the “free choice” of individuals.

To attempt to understand the internal process that leads to work addiction, Heide makes use of a concept that was developed in 1932 by the psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi. Though in passing, Ferenczi was the first to identify a “Sunday neurosis” among some of his patients, sometime aggravated by a “vacation neurosis,” characterized by “a certain boredom filled with a tension, that in itself was tiring to the point that it prevents the patient either from working or from enjoying himself.” But it is another one of his concepts that is relevant to us here: that of *the identification with the aggressor*. Ferenczi observed that child victims of mistreatment or of sexual abuse are so overwhelmed by the power of the adult that it is impossible for them to protest, even if only in their own thoughts. They react in this way: “If I submit to his will to the point of no longer having my own, if I don’t oppose him, perhaps he will spare my life.” It is a reflex that seeks protection from suffering, from the fear of feelings, by hiding in a sense of false security, in an illusory world. But the cost is on-going self destruction: because repression of anxiety itself generates anxiety that must in turn be repressed. If the aggressions continue, identification becomes a chronic state, normal behavior. A phenomenon can be seen in adult victims of repeated traumatic shocks in warfare that is almost identical but with an additional complication: the aggressor is not a specific individual but an anonymous force with motives that are not apparent. The victim doesn’t identify with a person but an insti-

tution. She gains the illusion of experiencing the omnipotence of this institution but at the price of the dissolution of her own identity. When, as in the case of a war, an entire generation endures the same trauma, the phenomenon becomes a social one. Particularly since the behavioral norms of this generation will not end when the generation does, for they can be transferred to offspring. We all know that influences in early childhood play a key role in an individual's later socialization.

So identification with the aggressor is the result of trauma, and Heide reminds us that work as we know it also began with a collective trauma: the one resulting from what is commonly called the industrial revolution, the moment when World Trade, Inc., after having taken control of artisan and peasant labor, put them directly under its domination in enclosed spaces subject to its autonomous logic and iron discipline. This implementation of forced labor took place under conditions of extraordinary violence. It is enough to read the horrific accounts of the period. But if today's humanistic conscience only sees unjustified cruelty there, it is essential to remember that this violence was in no way arbitrary. Without it, men (and women) would never have allowed themselves to conform to the demands of the heinous conditions of the factory. They never would have spontaneously left a way of life that, despite its poverty, guaranteed a margin of communal freedom. This is why in every country, no matter what the time or specific conditions, industrialization has had addiction as an essential precondition, in the original sense of the word, a traumatic co-



ercive act. As for the pitiless exploitation of children, which always engenders indignation, its express purpose was to create a generation cut off from traditions that created “unusable” adults, to use the terminology of an industrialist of that era. Once this was accomplished, they stopped forcing children to work. At this point, their training could be left up to the school system.

That’s going a bit far back in history, someone will say, to explain a contemporary phenomenon. But if Heide mentions this inaugural violence, it’s mainly because a part of his work deals with Southeast Asia, where industrialization is much more recent. Contrary to the vaguely racist preconceptions on this topic, no atavism predisposes the Japanese to work themselves to death. In the Edo period (1603–1868), artisans and peasants were known for their art of the break, and their daily lives were frequently interrupted by community celebrations. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a German industrialist complained: “the Japanese worker is reluctant to conform to military discipline which, according to our norms, must rule the modern factory.” Three decades later the Japanese industrialists made the same critique of the Korean workers... The extreme forms that work addiction takes in these countries, often leading to madness or death, are simply the result of the fact that a process that unfolded over two centuries in Europe took place in Japan in just a few generations. There was no time for individuals to absorb the accelerated series of traumatic shocks.

There is a more fundamental reason to return to the primordial crime of Capital: because to date, nothing has come

along to fix it. In general, people reassure themselves, conditions of life for the working population have improved thanks to the combined actions of the workers movement, the welfare state, and the evolution of social mores. It's true: it's not the same anymore. But no one's really recovered from it either. For the primordial wrong has never been put right. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Japanese workers responded to a questionnaire by saying that the most painful loss brought about by their going to work was the loss of community. European workers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century would most certainly have said the same. This loss has not been mitigated by the increase in buying power or the reduction of the work week. Certainly their common fate and above all the struggles against this loss have given birth to workers communities. The British miners waged the last great struggle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the explicit goal of saving their communities. But this struggle, like all the others at that time, resulted in defeat: confronted with dislocation, many sunk into depression, alcohol, or suicide. With each great leap forward (towards the abyss) World Trade, Inc. makes, the communities that block the way are destroyed, and thereby the primal scene is reactivated. This is how labor is being made "flexible" now, a process that has eliminated the last remaining barriers protecting the individual from the market.

It is important to recall a fact that the sycophants of social progress like to forget: rarely have men (and especially women) worked as much as they do today. In the Middle Ages, between religious, local and professional holidays, and fairs, a

Parisian artisan had a minimum of one hundred fifty days a year of free time. The workday of a peasant was not measurable because it was constantly interrupted, and at the end of summer the harvest festival celebrated the end of the work year. If some Mephisto had come along and proposed to the poor of the time the following deal: I will offer you central heating, a washing machine, and social security, but on condition that you double your work time and give up community celebrations, there is little chance they would have accepted. The Rule of Saint Benedict, which is generally taken as the founding act of the work ethic, only established a 36-hour work week, and this despite the fact that the monks were self-sufficient and had rudimentary methods of production. And we can cite the extreme example of the Old Believers, isolated from the rest of the world deep in Siberia, who sustain themselves in the most extreme conditions and who still manage to devote six hours a day to free time, in this case to prayer.<sup>23</sup> Still today, Western tourists cannot contain their nostalgia when they see tribes who, living in utter destitution, “take the time to live.” The considerable gains of industrial society have not made up this time to us. Obviously this doesn’t mean that the poverty of past epochs creates a lust for life, but certainly that modern work destroys it.

In the same way the improvement of living conditions doesn’t signify the end of the primordial constraint but its internalization. They will say: “that’s how it is.” One way of life

23 Vassili Peskov, *Ermites dans la taïga*, Actes Sud, Arles, 1995. [English edition: *Lost in the Taïga*. Doubleday: 1994.]

replaces another, one gets used to it, and anyway the new one offers clear advantages. Today it is fashionable to question any position that brings in a distinct “human nature”, which can only ever be a social construction. However, individuals have a real biological rhythm, based on tension and release, fatigue and sleep. There is a limit to how much pressure the autonomic nervous system can endure. At the same time all of us have a need for community, quite simply because without community there could be no individuality either. In this sense the conditions to which most people in the world today are subject cannot be “second nature.” They have had to adapt to these conditions, of course, but this adaptation is not the same as a mutation of the species. Which is why there is no need, in order to criticize, to fall into romantic nostalgia for old times. It is enough to allow yourself the time to reflect and find in your heart of hearts what remains definitively inassimilable in the roles and rhythms prescribed by the aggressor. But most often these very rhythms make any reflection impossible—and that’s when the body reacts, for the body is not easily fooled.

As I write these lines, I see an inherent risk in my argument: that of discussing a pathological phenomenon in the name of “health” or “healthy living” or even the “normal,” in other words, of talking like an old fogey. It is always well advised to mistrust dogmas that offer explanations of the meaning of life and a way of following it as if they were intangible givens. As obvious as the evils of addiction are, a normative response is no less problematic. It is not unusual that the cures for addiction

are an underhanded means to tie individuals weakened by withdrawal to sects, schools, or disreputable institutions. And even if directed without manipulative intent, these rehab programs can hook the addict, who for the rest of their lives cannot miss their visit to the therapist. For identification with the aggressor he substitutes identification with the therapist, creating a simple transfer of dependency. So we have to be wary of defining what is a *normal* amount of work, a *healthy* level of the satisfaction of desires, etc. But in the same way, though it is quite impossible to prove that a proposition is true, it is easy to prove that a proposition is false, and with no need for recourse to universal norms to state that certain behaviors are pathological and self-destructive.

I opened the *Psychology of Motivation* by Paul Diel and discovered a striking analogy between the phenomena I am trying to understand and one of the forms of intrapsychic work depicted in this book: what Diel calls *banalization*. In the banalized individual, the personality dissolves in an “obsessive activity focused on the satisfaction of multiple desires,” desires for which “each satisfaction, because of its inherent insufficiency, becomes the basis for a new fantasy, with an increasing loss of intensity.” Banalization is not so much an inhibition as an *exhibition*. Incapable of sublimation, the banalized person loses his sense of the sublime. He is eaten up by parasitic needs, by the “titillation of the banal vanity resulting from being more successful than others.” I could cite everything that Diel exposes in such evocative terms: the “misinterpretation of life”, the “triumphant resignation in failure.” Except that in this book

(written in 1947) he is still positing a marginal, misguided form of motivation that he opposes to a norm comprised of mental health and *joie de vivre*.<sup>24</sup> The relevance of this perspective, even when Diel wrote this, is doubtful; in any case it's certainly obsolete today, when *the norm is banalization*. We can easily picture the fruitless dialogues between Diel and a connectionist/deconstructionist contemporary. The latter, hearing him invoke a "true" motivation, would get up onto one of his high post-modern horses, call it bourgeois rigidity, the simulacrum, and stubbornly defend his right to *différance*. The aged psychologist, for his part, would diagnose his opponent as a desperate case of banal debasement, willful narcissism, and the death of the soul. Here we reach a characteristic point where the past and the present cannot communicate, the old guardrails appearing to our era as so many arbitrary obstacles.

Denying the existence of addiction on the grounds that all behavioral norms are illusory would be, in any case, a very weak argument. To label someone an alcoholic, you don't need to be a teetotaler or, like a cop, to define what an acceptable quantity of alcohol is. *Symptoms* are what lead to the observation. Addiction manifests itself first as insatiability. To get the same effect you have to constantly increase the dose. And yet the symptoms of mass failure to satisfy desires are far too obvious everywhere around us (and also *in us*) for the reality of the

24 However, Diel does consider the banalized person as difficult to cure, since his perversion comes to appear normal to the subject. He appeals to a "change of public imagination on the meaning of life" which leads the banalized, always in line with public opinion, to adopt, despite himself, a more sensible way of life.

phenomenon to remain an open question. What the society of work really produces is lack.

Without a doubt, addiction is much more visible and identified in the sphere of consumption. Everyone knows the drugs of television, the Internet, the cell phone, the supermarket, etc. It's become commonplace to say it: consumers are *hooked on* a constant flow of new products, their bulimia being the necessary precondition for the health of the market. Particularly in this domain, it would be mistaken to want to define a fixed level of satisfaction. If I have chosen, however, to examine the subject from the perspective of work, it is because for me, you inhibit understanding by restricting your approach to the sphere of compulsive shopping. Advertising, an epiphenomenon, would then be seen as the cause (this will be the subject of the next chapter). Hyper-work and hyper-consumption are two complimentary forms of addiction. There is a circularity here that is wonderfully illustrated by an example that I came upon during one of my investigations into demotivation: a high-level executive at a major finance institution explained that she owned two thoroughbred horses whose upkeep was very expensive and that she never had time to ride, arguing: "Since I make money I really should do something meaningful with it." Immediately following this, to the question of whether she would like to work less so that she had more time, even if it meant reducing her income, she responded, "But there's no way, I have two horses to support!" One isn't hooked for just a certain number of hours a day or in certain places. Addiction is a

*lifestyle* and has implications for the individual as a whole. Which is why it is so difficult to kick.

But the preceding commentary also demonstrates that the phenomenon of addiction cannot be reduced to an “at-risk population.” Nobody can completely avoid participating; nobody can claim to be fully immune. At the most one can differentiate forms of neurotic compensation and degrees of dependency. Which is why it would be rather presumptuous to prescribe a single method of detoxification that would be effective for everyone. Simply put, considering World Trade, Inc. in all of its lived dimensions as a fundamentally addictive system, and seeing the banal motivations as so many bad pretexts for reckless abandon, can contribute to the reinforcement of the mind’s immune response. This is not such a bad place to start.



# V METAMORPHOSES OF THE FETISH

*He combined pure water with the gifts of Bacchus,  
and it became molten gold flowing into his mouth.  
Fearing this strange evil,  
(poor and rich at the same time)  
he tried to rid himself of this toxic wealth,  
and what he previously desired, he now hates.*

—Ovid

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Portuguese sailors and missionaries who had landed on the coast of West Africa wanted to describe the various religious objects of the indigenous people they discovered, they spoke of *feitiços*. The word is derived from the Latin *factitius*, which has a double meaning of “artificially fabricated” and “false.” That is how the ambivalence of the fetish, from the very start, arose. Otherness, fabrication, and falseness were inextricably mixed, and they still are today. As for “fetishism,” this term was invented in 1760 by Charles de Brosses, who was president of Parliament and a religious historian in his spare time. Under the term “fetish,” he lumped together amulets, statuettes, bones, and other magical objects worshipped by so-called primitive peoples in a conceptual sleight of hand that landed a double punch: on the one hand he flippantly mixed phenomena that were only alike in their foreignness to European culture, and on the other he underlined the superiority of that European culture, emancipated as it was from obscurantism

and superstitions thanks to the Enlightenment and science. The fetishists were the others, the savages.

This reassuring vision of reality was contested by Karl Marx in his well-known passage on the “fetish-character of the commodity.” He was greatly struck by a statement made by President de Brosses, that in the eyes of the native Cubans, gold was “the fetish of the Spaniards.” Tit for tat: here magic returns, erupting in the heart of the industrial world. It has been around ever since. No one needs to have read *Das Kapital* to have a vague notion of commodity fetishism. Everyone can attest to the fact that the motivations of a purchase are not rational and what it is convenient to call “consumption” surpasses the explanations of economists in every way. It is easy to imagine that all an extraterrestrial ethnologist landing on our planet would find is imperious cults, captivating icons, sudden bursts of enthusiasm, and incomprehensible rituals. It is easy to imagine, for we become this extraterrestrial as soon as we try to figure out what it is we have gotten ourselves into. That is quite a mystery.

The mystery, according to Marx, is that in commodity exchange a social relation takes on “the fantastic form of a relation between things.” This relationship is called value. It is interesting to observe how, beginning with this point, Marx comes to speak of fetishism. Like any relationship, value cannot be understood simply through an empirical description. You need to resort to images and symbols, and Marx went looking for them “in the obscure regions of the religious world.” So in the beginning it was simply *an analogy*. The table that “stands

on its wooden head in front of the other commodities and produces a fantasy more bizarre than if it were to dance” is quite clearly a metaphor. And yet, as they are used, metaphors tend to acquire an existence of their own. Like the ambiguity of phrases that begin with “it all happens as if...” Do they mean, “it actually happens that way?” Isn’t it really only a way to talk about something that is indefinable? Or is it a pretense? In fact, as soon as it convinces the reader or interlocutor, the image will become effective, at least as a figure of speech. One will get used to speaking of fetishism as if it really existed to the point of believing in it.<sup>25</sup> Incidentally, it is amusing to note that today’s detractors of “the society of the image” who turn to the Marxist theory of fetishism to criticize it don’t see that this text itself is made up of images. This is a frequent outcome of theory fetishism.

The function of the fetishist metaphor is multi-faceted. First of all it confers a specific mission on the critique that makes use of it. Marx writes that commodities are like “hieroglyphs” that we must decipher. The deceived gaze only sees signs, but these signs have a hidden meaning whose unveiling is tantamount to a desecration, a step on the path to the practical profanation of the world. If that doesn’t eliminate the rule of value, it at least gives it a name. Humanity can now understand that what they are doing in commodity exchange, “they

25 Who knows if religion didn’t actually begin by the phrase: “everything happens as if a supernatural being has created this” and only little by little, out of laziness, the first part of the sentence was abandoned...

do unwittingly.” In this way, the theory of fetishism provides a response to the old question of voluntary servitude. If humanity is alienated, why don’t they throw off their yokes? Because they are subjugated by their products, which they see as independent beings with lives of their own; they are deceived by an illusion, a phantasmagoria. But above all, defining fetishism is at the same time defining what is exterior to it, drawing a line between the rational and the irrational. Real social life, according to Marx, is defined by “material production and its corresponding relationships,” and these are exempt from all magic. Except that they are hidden by a “mystical cloud that veils their appearance.” The theory of fetishism has as its goal, then, to free up a rationality hidden behind supernatural appearances. It creates a being that contains the totality of the world’s metaphysics, thereby purifying the rest of the world. In other words, Marx is the de Brosse of economy. For de Brosse the cult of fetishistic gods contains a rational core that, in the Europe of the Enlightenment, freed itself from its veneer of superstition. For Marx the cloud of fetishism will dissipate when freely associating humans become the conscious masters of their own actions. Then, the fabricated will no longer be false. Social relations are already rational; they need to become transparent, disenchanted. To speak his language, Marx wants to abolish the magic of the commodity without realizing it. He is, as it were, a fetishist of rational mastery. An echo of this dualist conception—and this is why I have taken this detour—can be found among those who criticize the cruelty of finance capital in the name of honest

business, or the treachery of advertising in the name of authentic needs. I will revisit this point.

But for the moment we return to the adventures of fetishism. As the ethnologists and religious historians refined their observations, they definitively banished this term as decidedly too crude to usefully describe anything. But in the meantime it found itself a new career. Four years after the death of Marx, Alfred Binet published *Fetishism in Love*, which introduced the concept into psychopathology. Given the anti-pagan origins of the word, it is funny to note that for Binet, fetishism is monotheistic. While the “normal” lover delights in a multiplicity of stimulations, the fetishist is a pervert insofar as his libido fixates on one object, whether that be hair, feet, or women’s underwear, excluding all other sources of stimulation. This would seem to take us away from the critique of the commodity, but we will get back to it quickly. For, Binet asserts, it only appears that the fetishist adores a concrete object. An object is only concrete in its *singularity*, meaning, on the one hand, that through which it distinguishes itself from other objects of the same type (this pair of shoes compared to all other shoes), and on the other hand by what ties it to its environment (these shoes worn by a specific person in a specific situation). On the contrary “the lover of Italian dresses is not infatuated by a specific design worn by a specific person, what he loves is not a particular object, but the *genre*.” Fetishism would then be a process of abstraction on two levels: on the one hand singularity vanishes for the sake of the genre, of the “class of objects” as Binet put it; on the other

hand, the object is no longer an attribute of the being desired, but on the contrary this being is only the courier, contingent in itself, of the object. For the fetishist “no matter if the woman is ugly, so long as the cult object is beautiful.” Individuals are as indifferent as particular objects, and by this very fact, they are *interchangeable*. These characteristics, one will admit, are similar to those that characterize commodity value. Since it is always classes of objects that are made and sold, the libidinal investment leading to their purchase can be interpreted in terms of perverse fetishism.

Psychopathology offers other possible analogies. According to Freud, fetishism is the consequence of relational angst. The adored object is objectified<sup>26</sup> communication, which evokes the currently popular idea that wearing a popular fashion item is a substitute for personal recognition. The sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld pointed out that store windows with their displays of shoes and lingerie are a constant incitement to fetishism. Of course, he is only referring to objects that are specifically intended to excite sexual perverts as his discipline defines them, but it is tempting to understand this observation in terms of all classes of objects that the market offers its lusting regulars. Moreover, other psychologists will define kleptomania as a form of fetishism, and by kleptomania they don't only mean the sneaky theft of dresses hanging on the neighbor's laundry line,

26 I prefer “objectification” to “reification,” which is generally the translation for the German *Verdinglichung*. [“Thingification” and “objectification” are both English alternatives to “reification.” —Tr.]

but absolutely all forms of shoplifting. From this strange point of view, what would be abnormal is not the fixation on the object, but the way the need is satisfied, perversion only commencing with the desecration of exchange value. Granoff sees in theft an “excitation of a sexual nature,” but then what are the motives behind the act of purchase? It is difficult not to detect a related symptom in hyper-consumption.

During the 60s, commodity fetishism made a dramatic return to social critique. We can assume that if the notion was so galvanized then it is less in the sense given to it in Marx’s *Capital* than as a result of the libidinal and perverse connotation that has been superimposed on it since then. It’s well known: the fetishist is the person who “alienates himself” by buying designer brands. Recall that for Marx the commodity relation is essentially fetishistic, meaning that a shipment of scrub brushes is as much a fetish as an Armani suit. It may seem odd that a long-abandoned notion that ethnologists used to describe ancient societies continues to be used in the critique of contemporary society. The interpretation that modern ethnology offers is the *symbolic*, which was incidentally an approach that semiologists and other structuralists of that time picked up. Indeed, since the 50s it has become difficult to limit oneself to the classic categories of “material needs” and “use value” to explain the flood of gadgets. So we will discover *another* value. If there is a demand for these products, it is not primarily because they are useful, but because they are symbols, signs of recognition. This is definitely an improvement over the vulgar economic interpretation, but

it doesn't take us very far. What is it then, what is it based on, this purchased sign recognition? On this subject theory up until now has had nothing to say.

Be that as it may, the theory of symbolic value was too neutral, too descriptive to have been able to serve as a *denunciation* of existing conditions, while the fetish maintained a strong disparaging tone. It is still the sham, the deception. So it's this notion that would be revisited around 1968 to "contest consumer society," as it was called then, and this renewal brought yet another mutation. The rediscovery of commodity fetishism was the result of the reprinting of *History and Class Consciousness* by Lukàcs. But in this book, written in 1922, it's no longer a matter of an analogy as in Marx; here the fetish indeed exists and it is haloed in an aura of religiosity that would never leave it. Like many Jewish intellectuals from Mitteleuropa,<sup>27</sup> the young Lukàcs was filled with millenarian militancy. Just a few years earlier he witnessed World War I as the triumph of Evil announcing the imminent arrival of the Messiah in the form of the revolution. Having newly joined communism, he tried with *History and Class Consciousness* to integrate this messianic vision into Bolshevik practice (he failed: having been criticized by Lenin, he quickly renounced his book). Is it any wonder then that in his quest for an entry point, the texts in which Marx described value in religious terms offered an unexpected

27 For more on this, see: Michael Löwy, *Rédemption et utopie*, Paris, PUF 1988. [English edition: *Redemption and Utopia: Libertarian Judaism in Central Europe*. Stanford University Press: 1992.]



opportunity? As materialist as his theory might seem, the underlying story is strictly mythical. It is the field of battle between two absolutely irreconcilable principles. In the world of illusions generated by capital, all the “processes” are congealed into “objects” and the individuals find themselves in a relation of pure contemplation. With the imminent revolution, fetishes will dissolve, subjects and objects will fuse, and the category of the totality arrives.

Far be it from me to make fun here: I actually have a weakness for Manichean visions. But it's on condition that they pass themselves off as visions, and not rigorous theories. We can't forget that the “category of totality” is only a part of the whole. Moreover, Lukàcs, now an old communist uneasy about the late success of his work, wrote a postscript in 1967 in order to warn his readers against the errors of his youth. In particular he regretted that in his book, the analysis of a specific social state slid towards that of the “eternal human condition.” But this auto-critique would be received as a confirmation of his Stalinism. That same year *Society of the Spectacle* by Debord appeared, which took Lukàcs' vision even further. “The notion of commodity fetishism,” it reads, and you have to closely read each word here, “is absolutely achieved in the spectacle, where the tangible world finds itself replaced by a selection of images that exist above it.” The fetishized category is thus no longer “the commodity,” but really “the world.” Let's remember that the spectacle in question not only includes manufactured products, or what is shown in the mass media, but

more fundamentally the ensemble of *representations* (Debord plays on the polysemy of this word—a representation can be theatrical, political, pictorial, union, etc.), which, if they are not already commodities, are destined to become them. Men are absolutely dominated by an “effectively real illusion,” and only an absolute of non-representation can be opposed to this one. But to recognize the illusion, one must be able to speak from a place that is protected from it. In the allegory of Plato’s cave, an escaped prisoner sees the light and understands that his companions only perceive a theater of shadows. What is—in the allegory of the spectacle (for despite what one really wants to think about it, this is most certainly an allegory)—the light that allows one to consider the fetishistic world with a disillusioned eye? They are, in the situationist text, figures like “directly lived life,” “poetry without poems,” “de-alienated relations,” “direct communication,” and other epiphanies that must remain imprecise; since every attempt to make them real makes them fall fatally back into the spectacular.

To denounce “the image” or “representation,” in the name of “directly lived” life is, like it or not, to return to an ancestral religious tradition. Günther Anders, whose critique of the “world as phantom and as matrix” precedes the *Society of the Spectacle* on many points, was aware of this. Though an atheist, Anders wrote

If something attracted me to Judaism at an early age it was the commandment that *prohibits the making and worshipping of idols*. Despite the fact that during my youth I

painted from morning to night, and during the 20s I was, for a while, a guide at the Louvre, for me the *prohibition against images* (*Bildverbot*) was always in effect.<sup>28</sup>

The modern spectacle that Anders discovered in television during his 1948 exile in America was, according to him, the *phenomenon*. But his critique was founded on an *ontological* critique of the image. For him there were no good images, every image was idolatry; it was not a reflection of reality but a substitute for it. In fact, Anders applied a timeless precept to the interpretation of the present, and he did it based on an *a priori* metaphysics acknowledged as such. At least it remained his personal religion; he said “for me,” he did not proselytize, he was content to offer his vision of the world to the public.

On the other hand, whoever wants to *attack* fetishism in the real world must be an iconoclast. I should be clear about this word, as it has been banalized in our times, where any artist who comes along is described approvingly by the media as an iconoclast. It is expected they will get this label even when they don’t break anything! The world is full of iconoclasts who receive government grants. On the other hand, we remember the scandal when the Taliban blew up the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan.<sup>29</sup> For the iconoclasts, whether Jewish, Christian, or

28 “Mein Judentum” cited in *Günther Anders sur Einführung*, Junius, Hamburg, 1988. Anders’ emphasis. “The world as a phantom and as matrix” is a chapter from *L’obsolescence de l’homme* (1956), Ivrea, Paris 2001 for [French] translation of the first volume.

29 The protests obviously weren’t defending Buddhism, but “cultural heritage.” Post-religious indifference only accords statues with aesthetic value. It is

Muslim, all representation is an impediment to direct experience. To represent nature and all living beings is to assume the power of divine creation. Any image of God (or a caricature of the Prophet!) is an usurping idol and so must be destroyed. But it happens that with an unfortunate regrettable historical consistency, the majority of people demonstrate pointed idolatrous tendencies. So a community blessed with the divine message would have to oppose the majority. Doing this, it does not attempt to understand the reasons for this idolatry, nor change them. The evil is not to be understood, but eradicated. It must be banned. As amusing as it was to watch the Bolsheviks transform churches into “museums of superstition” or potato warehouses, the inanity was clearly demonstrated by what followed. As soon as the ban was lifted, the churches filled right back up. Above all, the authoritarian suppression of religious icons (and commodity icons as well) only led to the unleashing of the idolatry of the state, which had plenty of its own icons. The motivation of iconoclasts is more often than not the elimination of competition. Which means that it is not a departure from the religious relationship. Whether he shuns the fetishes’ seductions or breaks them, the iconoclast is no less under their spell. He believes in them. Only the religious are iconoclasts. Agnosticism means you are completely indifferent to the presence of the Buddha, a Benneton ad, or even a crucifix.

All these detours lead us to the following point: before

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scandalized when they are treated as fetishes, which is to say the religious objects that they are. For that matter, had the Buddhas been blown up to make way for a hydro-electric dam project, nobody would have peeped.

critiquing the commodity system, it is the “critique of consumer society” that must be critiqued, for it has gone on like a broken record for the last forty years with no other result than the incessant renewal of the system it claims to oppose. It is my opinion that it is fundamentally imprisoned within the original limits of the notion of the fetish. Just as the savages were supposedly the victims of the hocus pocus of sorcerers, ordinary people are at the mercy of advertising. The false gods of the primitives prevent them from accepting true divinity, just as the false needs created by marketing keep people from recognizing their authentic needs. In both cases the critique is mistaken because it pretends to originate from a disabused perspective. Not only does it prevent us from understanding the real forces at work, it serves as one of their precious allies.

On the site of an anti-consumption group called *Casseurs de pub*<sup>30</sup> a manifesto calling on everyone to “destroy the system of images wherever it strikes, demystifying the system of seduction in order to stop the process of integration.” Here they see the “duty of an iconoclast.” Duty, obviously. If you have to destroy the golden calves it is in order to replace it with the Ten Commandments. This is one of the reasons most people still prefer golden calves. Among the ten anti-fetishist commandments:

Be wary of the temptation of gift-giving (with its attractive wrapping) around the holidays: because though one might think one is being selfless in giving, one is really feeding shameless over-consumption.

30 [Adbusters in France. —Tr.]

Reject made-up promotions and sham sales. The temptation of each commodity contributes to the overall trappings of the system.

Beyond the naïveté of believing that the “system” would be the least bit concerned by the destruction of a few billboards, beyond the contempt for all those who need to chase after sale items in order to survive, this moralistic renunciation with its fear of seduction, its anathematizing of gifts, its guiding of consciences, is a Puritanism that’s even more certain to scare people away than the worst ads. And like all Puritanism, it is all the more perfectly hypocritical, because obviously none of us can avoid consuming commodities for very long, whether they are on sale or not. He who wants to play the angel will act like a beast.

Beginning with the principle that the image is substituted for reality, the iconoclast concludes: eliminate the image and reality will regain its rights. The international spokesperson for anti-consumption, Naomi Klein, bemoans that fact that today it is no longer products, but brands that are purchased. For example Nike doesn’t sell tennis shoes but rather its swoosh logo, a symbol of young, sporty, and hedonistic culture. The shoes are secondary, only a surface upon which the logo is imprinted. A pair of Nikes is a symbol of belonging; through it, adolescents recognize each other as part of the same tribe. In the temple of Niketown, Michael Jordan’s shoes are displayed on an altar. The product is an icon that represents ethereal values. And it really seems like it is the ethereal values that most scandalize the anti-

fetishists. They want shoes without prestige that serve simply to fit on our feet. Without advertising, they add, they could be produced by well-paid workers. It is the myth of a real economy finally concerned with satisfying “the material needs” of humanity, while the false economy only creates artificial needs and useless spending.

It may be useful to remember that State socialism did this very thing for sixty years—with little success, as everyone knows. Scarcity, in the Eastern Bloc, also consisted of mountains of shoes that nobody wanted. Though they wore as well (or not so well) as other shoes, they weren’t expensive, there was no advertising decorating them with false seductions. What was the problem? Quite simply, the monotonous products available in state shops also represented something ethereal: a denial of uniqueness, the requirement to conform to an ideological image of social needs as created by the state. In a word: humiliation.<sup>31</sup> Chase off the ethereal; it will return at full speed. For people in the East it was impossible to know the commodity. They gazed upon its promises from afar without being able to directly experience its repeated disappointments. The anti-fetishism of the State deprived them of this disappointment. Which is why the arrival of products from World Trade, Inc. in 1989 was greeted with greater enthusiasm than the introduction of parliamentary democracy. I remember packs of Marlboros and porn videos dis-

31 Since the Wall came down, these same products have become “cult,” because now they are loaded with other symbolic values. It is chic to drive around in a Trabant, since now it is out of choice.

played in pyramids like so many trophies in the streets and shop windows of East Berlin. Punks and intellectuals could easily rage against this infantile behavior of the masses, but that didn't slow their mad dashes to find records and books that they had coveted for so long and that were finally available. But this enthusiasm is inseparable from its opposite. The first time one of my East German friends entered a supermarket in the West, she was literally so taken by nausea that she threw up her breakfast on an underwear display.

To only see shoes as fulfilling the need to wear them is to think in a perfectly utilitarian manner and to ignore the paradox that Georges Bataille so eloquently described: the superfluous is necessary. From its beginning, World Trade, Inc. has been based on a thirst for the useless: luxury. Global commerce prospered thanks to spices, silk, rugs, perfume, precious jewelry, tea, coffee, tobacco—all things for which it is difficult to find a preexisting need.<sup>32</sup> Commodity seduction cannot be explained as the pathological drifting from a rational norm; it doesn't address need, but desire, which has never ever recognized law. Far be it from me to suggest, of course, that we compare Chinese silk from the Ming Dynasty to a crude pair of Nikes. It goes without saying that in terms of sensual enjoyment the two are at opposite ends of the spectrum. The difference is that one is a unique, artisanal object for which only the best materials are used, and the other

32 Rather, it's really the State that took to harnessing needs to fill its coffers. If the poor had the Salt Tax imposed on them in those bitter times, it is because salt is the only vital element that cannot be found easily everywhere, and whose acquisition fulfills a real need.



is mass-produced at the lowest possible cost. By definition, there is no mass produced luxury good. But what is similar is the social dimension of desire the object comes to represent. If a prince of the old world was prepared to go into debt to buy everything the merchants offer him, it was not only to please his senses, but because this ownership played an integral role in the game of rivalry and power with his peers.

“Use value,” so imprecise and simplistic a term, covers up the fact that the use of the object is, first of all, social. This is what the critics of fetishism misunderstand. If, today, icons representing prestige, rivalry, and recognition have such power, it is because to all appearances, prestige, rivalry, and recognition are universal social “needs,” even if individuals demonstrate them to a high degree of variability (those who only see them as “false needs” created by the system are probably themselves fairly deprived of them). It is not advertising that has invented them. In the case of mass-produced products like pairs of Nikes, their ethereal value becomes more prominent as their material reality is impoverished. The yearning for luxury is exiled in it. As regrettable as this may be, all there is today are crude shoes (or similar products) that are the stuff of rivalry and recognition.

Here, the motivation for a purchase is radically different from fetishism in Binet’s sense. In both cases there is a libidinal investment in a class of objects. But the pervert is alone with his object of desire; his attachment is purely narcissistic because he makes the person whose nice glutes or shoes he covets into a complete abstraction. It matters little to him whether others

share his solitary pleasure. He alone decides what is important to him. On the other hand, in the article he covets, the consumer is not only looking for his narcissistic reflection: by owning it he wants to be distinguished and distinguish himself, that is, to measure himself against others. It is precisely this social dimension of desire that distinguishes him from the fetishistic pervert. The consumer will never be satisfied.

In reaction to their hippie parents who knit their own sweaters, many of their children went headlong into the frenzy of consumerism. They wanted to be “hedonists” and “individualists,” to understand how to play with the codes and subvert the symbols, in short to pretend they could move through the world of the commodity like fish in the sea. This tendency fizzled long ago and the popular manifestos of the *consommiste* party that blossomed just ten years ago are not taken seriously by any one today. It’s because they committed an error diametrically opposed to the mistakes of the generation of ‘68. While the latter did not grasp the moment of fascination, the former did not understand a moment equally significant: that of disappointment.<sup>33</sup> For clearly the consumer’s expectations can only be disappointed. It is impossible to stand out owning a class of objects to which everyone has access. It is that ever-comic image of the woman who sees that the woman sitting next to her is wearing the same dress she bought to focus attention. Nor can any product guarantee a sense of belonging. A given brand promises

33 The theory of “false needs” cannot understand disappointment any more clearly, since it does not recognize what exactly it is that is disappointed.

membership in an exclusive club, but when this product attains “cult” status, the number of buyers quickly grows, until they all feel overrun by the masses and take refuge in another marginal brand. The game begins again, and this time the stakes are higher.

In sum, if the demand for uniqueness, rivalry, and recognition existed before the commodity, the purchase leaves it unsatisfied. Once again it is important to note that this dissatisfaction is not a perverse effect of the process; it is its condition *sine qua non*. Once again, let’s recall our donkey in the prologue: if he gets the carrot, he stops moving. Disappointment is built in to motivation. As the continuous development of new products is crucial to the infinite expansion of World Trade, Inc., it would be fatal if a product permanently satisfied the consumer. Capital can only prosper in the constant destruction of purchasing habits. What is new today is that the creation-destruction cycles have shortened considerably and disappointment now plays a larger role than expectation. A given product has not had enough time to deeply penetrate the market when it is ousted by another one. This commodity gangbang doesn’t give desire any room to unfurl; it only allows the individual to experience a series of increasingly weak and fleeting stimuli. Here as in the sphere of work the choices are few: addiction or detachment.

Such an hypothesis (it isn’t intended to be anything else) differs from the routine critique of commodity fetishism on a fundamental point. Sooner or later, the latter will have to provide an answer to this question: if the needs created by World Trade, Inc. are false, artificial, how do you explain their grip?

The response that most readily comes to mind is (if you believe Beigbeder) the motto of I don't know what advertising agency: "You shouldn't take people for idiots, but never forget that they are." Except that in this case "people" will only get what they deserve. So it would be hopeless to complain or to hope to achieve some change. As appealing as this explanation is, it is politically useless. All one can do is keep it to oneself, saving it for conversations among the liberated. The explanation that has some merit while leaving the possibility for change open—therefore qualifying it as the most reasonable—is that of the *great conditioning*. Behind the fetishes lurks a dark force, an all-powerful Beelzebub that frightens us: advertising.

For fifty years now, bestselling books, sensationalist films, and mainstream TV shows have presented us with a rather disturbing fact: hidden behind closed doors, sinister individuals have figured out how to enter our minds, they have gotten in and managed to manipulate the codes so that now we are controlled by them, directed to the supermarket aisles where we fill our carts, following their subliminal instructions. If we let ourselves be seduced by the constantly changing fetishes of World Trade, Inc., it is simply because the advertisers' hands are pulling the strings of our desires. At least we have been warned; "the hidden persuaders"<sup>34</sup> are not as hidden as they seem. Since the time it was introduced, this technique has been so thoroughly exploited and discussed, one wonders why brands still feel the

34 Title of the book by Vance Packard (1958 for the French edition), which is a classic of this genre.

need to even use marketing. It should be sufficient for them to push a button and presto! we move toward the desired product. Even more so because the generation of children entirely conditioned by advertising, as yesterday's critics lamented, are today's adult consumers. As unpleasant as the idea of a strange power occupying the recesses of our brains is, people like this popular explanation because it makes them afraid and, at the same time, reassures them. Because this way, we finally become pure victims, and the problem of our motivation is no longer posed. We have been freed from the demands of making up our own minds. Advertising is to blame.

Ask anyone today if they really have the feeling that they are being directed by an outside force; they will answer no. Whether they detest or delight in ads, they will respond that in the end they play only a marginal role in determining the reasons they buy products. They may believe in the existence of the great conditioning but not that it affects them. The fetishists are always the others, "people." Even better, ask a critic of consumerism what it is that makes him own a cellular telephone (they always have one), and among all the justifications he will offer, none of them will include that he was influenced by advertising. If you mention this, he will probably respond that it is because the others are conditioned that he has to join them! Even at the level of empirical observation it is already permitted to doubt the influence that the dictatorship of advertising has on the unconscious. I already know the chorus of protests that will arise: how can you deny the evidence? Isn't the global advertising

budget second only to the military one? Isn't it obvious that we are, against our wills, assaulted night and day by ads that target not our reason but our impulses? Yes of course, but this doesn't mean that this assault is truly effective, let alone has the effectiveness it is said to have.<sup>35</sup>

It is quite appropriate to compare the immense sums invested in advertising with the weapons budgets of States because in both instances it is first of all a spending competition. It is enough to see their advertisements to note that their primary objective is not to launch new products. A brand that markets a truly new product can dispense with advertising *as long as it is the only company to offer it*. The function of advertising expenditures is to improve the company's position in relation to the competition, who themselves constantly try to outspend them. It is the typical spiral with weapons spending as well: the existing arsenal is already enough to destroy the planet ten times over; nevertheless, so long as the adversary continues to arm himself, the only choice is to stockpile. But the more excessive these expenses are, the more ridiculous their proportional effect becomes. An example: a thirty-second spot during the latest World Cup costs 250,000 Euros. *Le Monde Diplomatique* was offended, but without noting the real irony: hardly anybody saw the ad for the good reason that the moment they appeared on

35 According to an industry study, 55% of those interviewed said they neither loved nor hated advertisements, but something even worse: they were neutral! For 67% of those polled, advertisements are a "cause for annoyance," 73% considered them "invasive." The president of Publicis commented: "Politicians give us credit for a capacity for influence that we wish we had" ("Les Français prennent leur distances avec la publicité," *Le Monde*, 18 November 2004).

the screen, tens of millions of viewers took that opportunity to leave their armchairs and urinate, as is typical at half time! Indeed, advertisers could certainly reduce their expenses but only on condition that everyone do it. And so Advertising is not a central unified command, but a multitude of competing entities that individually do not have the power to really do anything.

Incidentally, it is noteworthy that the concept of the great conditioning is one that detractors of advertising took from their adversaries. For proof of this conspiracy, the same sources are always cited (often dating to the middle of the last century) in which specialists claim to be able to sell anything to anyone. Don't forget though, what these people have to sell, before anything else, is themselves. So it is natural that they boast about fantastic talents to persuade advertisers to hire them. It is funny that those leading the crusade against advertising are taken in by this self-promotion that they have every reason to assume is a scam. Quite recently neuro-marketing and brain scanning experiments are reviving the fantasy. But for the moment the only success these scientific manipulators have achieved are the profits they have extorted from their clients.<sup>36</sup>

Around the middle of the last century, business attempted to apply the techniques of mass manipulation, previously reserved to politics, to the conditioning of consumers. A well-known pioneer in the field was Edward L. Bernays, none other than the nephew of Freud. Bernays recommended the creation

36 In *On achète bien les cerveaux* (Paris, 2007) Marie Bérilide does not succeed in making the peril she so denounces very believable.

of an elite who “would pull the strings of public opinion, master the primordial forces, and open up new paths to redefine and direct the world.” The proposed approach was borrowed from his uncle Sigmund: the manipulation of unconscious libidinal symbols. Where the *Id* was, there the brand shall be. However, considering what Bernays actually did, you would have to note that his ambitions were somewhat exaggerated. The campaign that made him famous was one he undertook for Lucky Strike cigarettes in the late 20s. The brand was trying to expand its market among women, but there was a problem: a woman smoking in public was universally assumed to be a prostitute. To solve the problem Bernays would rely on the feminist movement, which at the same moment had emerged in a state of confusion, and would organize a major demonstration of women in New York displaying their emancipation by marching with cigarettes in their mouths. The campaign “torches of freedom” was a great success; none of the women ever suspected they were indeed marching on behalf of Lucky Strike. It was certainly a clever and innovative move, but can one really talk about it in terms of unconscious control? In fact, Bernays understood that the opening of a market presupposed the breaking of a taboo, and that a social group existed who for their own reasons sought that break. Besides, he said it himself: “public relations is a two-way street; the client has to understand the public, but the public also has to understand the client.” He had to channel the aspiration for emancipation in a commercial direction. Blatant recuperation! one might cry; sure, but didn’t



he simply accentuate a tendency that was already heading in this direction? Without the preexisting feminist motivation, Bernays couldn't have made the women want to smoke. On the other hand, there is every reason to believe that this same feminist motivation would have led women to smoke like men and some of them would have smoked Lucky Strikes.<sup>37</sup> Since then we have seen many *pride days* and many *parades* exude, without external influence, their own commercialization.

To return to *Casseurs de pub*, a *Libération* journalist slyly commented on their actions: "Since too much advertising kills advertising, controversy can't hurt. Especially if it helps revitalize the medium." You don't even have to wait for the devious manipulators to come and "recuperate" the movement to be convinced of the accuracy of this notion. Currently on the *Ad-busters* site (the Canadian *Casseurs de pub*) you can buy a pair of "no-logo" shoes made from vegetarian leather produced by unionized workers for only \$95! Your purchase helps fight the tyranny of the brand, they explain. After hippie beads and grunge jeans, natural cosmetics and organic vegetables, subversive DVDs and rebel CDs, anti TV TV-shows and fair trade coffee, here comes the new anti-system commodity: no-logo shoes (clearly the anti-fetishists seem to have a shoe fixation!). It is all too easy to see that this is yet another ad, which is simply using a

37 Another of Bernays' innovations was to publish "independent expert" declarations, bribes that affirmed cigarettes to be harmless anti-anxiety and anti-obesity remedies. This odious behavior is still used and effective today, however it does not seek to manipulate the libido, but aims at the destruction of the capacity for judgment, which is completely different.

different means, which just happens to be an anti-advertising web site. This way, it reaches a market segment that doubtless cannot be reached any other way, spurring an expansion of the market. Similarly, it is obvious that just as much as Nike, no-logo shoes are icons symbolizing an ethereal value: adherence to a politically-correct and socially-conscious community. It is the anti-fetish fetish. In its noble goal of expanding the war against the tyranny of brands, *Adbusters* will try to sell as many pairs of shoes as possible at \$95. Social margins will become profit margins. Incidentally the militant distribution of the product corresponds to the currently popular sales technique “viral marketing,” which is nothing more than the commodity version of word of mouth. The iconoclasts of today are the leaders of opinion tomorrow. If this dynamic succeeds, the no-logo brand will supplant the Nike brand, until a new generation rebels and launches a product that, this time, they promise, will be irrecoverable by the system.

The growth of World Trade, Inc., being based on the continuous creation of new products, demands that it draw on pockets of authenticity that are outside of it, meaning it prospects not only for products but for non-commodity values and aspirations, with the goal of transforming them into products. In this process, it is clear that the contestation of existing brands and norms provides a useful service, in that it upsets established market relationships and opens new areas of expansion. “Cultural interference” with its subversive intentions, is an integral part of the general movement of creative destruction. On the

other hand, the advertising dictatorship fantasized about by the anti-fetishists, far from perfecting the expansion of the commodity would be actually blocking its growth. Let's suppose that a hundred or so global brands were to succeed in conditioning all consumers to always buy their products: there would be no possible renewing, no elimination of outdated sectors, no new players on the scene. Bill Gates would not have stood a chance against the typewriter. It is not by chance that the idea of the great conditioning appeared at the same time as Taylorism: it was its complement. In both cases the engineers of the soul intended to create an alternative for the motivation of the masses. It shares the same illusion of control and the same underestimation of subjective choice. Bernays drew false conclusions from his uncle: the unconscious is no more a controllable device than the worker is a programmable robot. World Trade, Inc. long ago abandoned this myth of mastery. It's time its adversaries realize it.

Consult all the specialized web sites and trade journals you like: you will not find a single trace of the supposed totalitarian control that advertising exercises over consumers. Quite the contrary, they are constantly running after them, seeking to unlock the meaning of the circulating symbols, trying to capture tendencies in flight, though they change from month to month. The appropriate metaphor isn't a puppeteer pulling the strings but a cat chasing after a mouse. Of course he almost always ends up catching him but not without effort, and it is the mice who determine the tempo of the game. Specialists bemoan the fact that the classic criteria of market segmentation (age, sex, income,

family status) and even more sophisticated markers (milieu studies) no longer allow them to foresee how buyers will act. The CEO of an ad agency states:

The current problem is that everyone in advertising is acting like the hyper-consumer is the ideal consumer when in fact he only represents about 11% of the population.

So nine-tenths escape manipulation. As a result ad agencies no longer try to define target groups but to capture existing networks and milieus. Another specialist complains: “these groups are innumerable and it is not always easy to gain access to them.”

A specific but revealing example is the pharmaceutical industry. Here are the facts: never before have so many medications with such weak therapeutic benefits become available than today. At the same time, public health care is in decline, leaving patients more and more to pay for their drugs and therefore to make a choice in which cost plays a determinant role. Finally, doubts about the medical system have become widespread, and those who are ill now want to have a say in their own treatment. With the help of the Internet, there are forums and discussion groups for every disease; and these groups are increasingly being sponsored by the generosity of the pharmaceutical industry. This way, publicity is taken care of by the patients themselves. It's worth it to them to exchange experiences, fears and offer encouragement. As for buying medication, all you have to do is click the button at the edge of the screen. Of course this is optional, though in this specific context, if someone wants to care for themselves, they are forced to resort to a product, and

would have no choice but to go to another site sponsored by a competitor if they want an alternative. But this tactic is not restricted to the drug industry: blogs have become a favored marketing terrain, and far from titillating the libido, they appeal to one's "consumer competence."

Recently the director of one of the largest German pharmaceutical firms stated straight up: "90% of existing drugs don't do anything." The reason for this sudden burst of frankness was explained by the rest of his statement. Any given remedy, he said, is on average only suited to 10% of patients; because the way an illness manifests itself varies among individuals, a single treatment cannot be uniformly beneficial for everyone. The sole purpose of making the statement was to encourage what marketing calls optionalization. For each illness, the drug industry will now propose a line of different products, each corresponding to a profile type. The message to the consumer is this: we take you seriously; we are addressing your uniqueness. You no longer have the same lung cancer as everyone else, now you are part of a peer group with a customized treatment plan for your disease. In this way you can communicate to members in your group and find out which product line suits you best. So it means sticking as closely as possible to the suffering, while transmuting it into a positive value.

In all of the industrialized countries, more and more people are suffering from depression. In fact, this illness is so widespread that it is practically normal, at least, that is the message of one targeted campaign. One almost feels guilty not be-

ing depressed. It just so happens that marketing has discovered the dream customer in the hypomaniac (formerly known as the manic-depressive). In his manic phase he is filled with enthusiasm for a new product, even creating new uses for it, but for a very brief period, after which he pounces on the next product. Better still, he demonstrates the irresistible need to communicate his enthusiasm to others, making himself into an “opinion leader.” A slogan from L’Oreal, for example, is aimed at this narcissistic identification: “Because I am worth it.” The depressive phase follows, and then, unable to choose, he seeks refuge in the brands he is familiar with and that will bring him a sense of security. This hybrid behavior of the hypomaniac is the perfect answer to the contradictory double imperative of the market: addiction to new products and loyalty to old ones. Whether or not World Trade, Inc. is itself a deeply hypomaniacal system, it is enough to look at the stock market where sudden depressions follow periods of unchecked market speculation with an unpredictable rhythm that is characteristic of collective mania. So it is logical that the manic-depressive segment of the population responds best to its expectations. Franz Liebl goes so far as to assert that for marketing, hypomania is not a demand but a supply!<sup>38</sup>

And what about the libido in all this? Pessimistic diagnoses abound. The sexologist Gunther Schmidt testifies:

Thirty years ago patients consulted with us because of their overactive sex drives and didn’t know what to do

38 In *Kapitalismus und Depression III* (multi-authored book), Alexander Verlag, Berlin 2001.

with their impulses. Today they come to us complaining about their lack of desire, their sexual boredom.

When desire only exists to absorb supply, it can only lack, and this lack often feels like a personal failure. It seems that a critical stage has been reached in which the body, once the source of drives, has become a receptor of stimulation. And it is petrified at the idea of failure, at not being able to perform as expected. Henceforth, desire only desires desire, which the advertising industry has noted, as evidenced by the slogan of a German beer, “What I would give to be thirsty!” or that of Parly 2, “I don’t need anything unless you make me long for it.”

Obviously, this decline of libidinal energy doesn’t represent the triumph of advertising, but its failure. It’s running out of raw material. It has passed *peak desire*. In the end, all it can do is clutter brains the way it clutters mailboxes, bore us with the endless exhibition of contrived exciting motifs, and banalize images and symbols to the point that we no longer pay the slightest attention. However, it is too reductionist to incriminate only advertising images, TV sex, or virtual reality as so many critics suggest. More fundamentally, the cause of the asphyxiation of desire is the dispossession of time, which is the necessary condition of its fulfillment. You who wished to “live without dead time” and abolish boredom—you got it! Today, work as much as consumption demands our continual and active participation, our unbridled creativity, and tangible evidence of our positive engagement. Here we are, prevented from experiencing our own boredom. Which is why we must not only rise up against the depressive tendency

of World Trade, Inc., but also against its maniacal tendency. The sexologist Schmidt takes the withdrawal of his patients as the last resort left for individual autonomy confronted with pre-satisfied desires: wanting not to want.

As for wanting to “damage the system,” perhaps the best thing would still be to stubbornly buy the same products, undermining the cycles of new models. Which is of course why everything is done to make this impossible. The single-edged razor blades you liked are going to be quickly replaced by double, triple, and then quadruple blades for which you have little use. Nevertheless, in recent years large-scale distributors have been getting worried; a consistent decline in sales across the board indicates that a quarter of the consumers are in the early stages of revolt.<sup>39</sup> They are not responding to the appeals of the militant anti-fetishists, but acting in accord with this principle: If you cannot but buy things that don’t satisfy you, better pay less at the discount store. “There is clearly a rupture,” claims the director of a major marketing firm. And a psycho-sociologist goes even further: the race for innovation “has not been perceived by consumers as having any real value. The result was the opposite of what was intended, making the brand less desirable.” It seems that in this manner demotivation translates as a *purchasing desire strike*. Like all strikes, its chances of victory are uncertain, which is in no way a reason to break it.

39 “La distribution est désemparée face aux alterconsommateurs” *Le Monde*, July 14th, 2004.



# VI CANCELING THE PROJECT

*Where has he acquired enough eyes to spy upon you,  
if you do not provide them yourselves?  
How can he have so many arms to beat you with,  
if he does not borrow them from you?  
The feet that trample down your cities,  
where does he get them  
if they are not your own?  
How does he have any power over you except through  
you?  
How would he dare assail you  
if he had no cooperation from you?  
What could he do to you  
if you yourselves did not connive with the thief who plun-  
ders you,  
if you were not accomplices of the murderer who kills you,  
if you were not traitors to yourselves?*

—La Boétie

*A relentless and pointless struggle*—Perhaps the concept of asymmetry is still the most appropriate to describe the current moment. Everyone knows what it means in the military context. When an imperial power has attained supremacy of arms, logistics, and finance, it can attack where and when it wants to defeat any opposing force. Consequently, classical Western strategy, based on the head-on collision of two more or less equal forces, is no longer operative. In our era it is one force that fights alone, easily taking one place after another, and promptly ending up occupying the entire territory. But for the invader, this is where the trouble begins. We will always remember the triumphant “mission accomplished!” of Bush celebrating, on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003, the

“end” of hostilities in Iraq, and everything that followed. Once you destroy the institutions and infrastructure of a State, you better reconstruct them quickly because a population is not won over as easily as a territory. The humiliation of a defeat without a fight is not the ideal beginning for the conquest of hearts and minds. From time to time hostilities take the form of terrorist violence, i.e., inframilitary tactics. But more broadly, passive resistance—the inertia of the populace—thwarts the plans of the invading power. And that means stalemate. As time passes, the occupiers themselves become demoralized, the noble motives that mobilized them prove to be so many delusions. Once again the old adage is confirmed: superiority of arms does not make up for the morale of the troops. Not that we should be pleased about all this: it is quite possible that from the resulting chaos, everyone involved will come out losing in the end. But it is this situation that prevails and it is from here that we must begin.

The changes in the way the war is waged always reflect deeper transformations within societies. The French Revolution, industrialization, or anti-colonial wars upset the prevailing strategic models of their times. So it is not surprising that the guiding principles of asymmetric warfare turn up in other arenas today. The same goes for what was once known as class struggle. For a long time the dynamic of a society was understood as being the ad hoc result of a constant relation of forces, the opposition between the army of Work and that of Capital. In this trench war, punctuated by major social movements, each so-called advance is the result of a major struggle and can

be the target of an opposing counter-offensive. Until the final battle, apparently. But this military model has not had purely positive effects; with its institutionalization, the “general staff” of unions have ended up looking more like their opponents than like their rank and file. But still, it structured the conflict, in the heart of every nation state, between two more or less equally powerful forces.

Today, on the other hand, the global upper class is waging a unilateral war. One after the other the defense systems (whether they are legal, political, or customary) that once protected citizens of every country from the invasion of the commodity are swept away. Here as well, the aggressors arm themselves with means that are overwhelming compared to the capacities of their opponents to counter attack. Additionally, they have moved out of range of counter attack by freeing themselves of national limitations. You can take this analogy: the traditional role of global finance capital in asymmetrical combat vs. that of aerial bombing in modern warfare. The stranglehold of finance on World Trade, Inc. is comparable to that of the air force on the military command. In both cases the high altitude and the zero-risk of losses to their own forces allow the military command to take the offensive without risking consequences on the ground. The logic of a technological system has become separate from realities on the ground. The map of operations as it exists in the minds of the strategists has nothing to do with the actual territory, which is dotted with pitfalls and archaisms that are to be leveled forthwith. One has to redefine the terri-

tory so that it finally coincides with the map. In a word: *outsourcing*. Meaning... bomb first and check it out after. The same goes for the cosmetic euphemisms employed to describe operations (here the “surgical strike”, there “neutralizing”) while the actual results are accounted for as the losses and benefits of “collateral damage.” And since the human and social costs aren’t ever measurable, the balance sheet can come out positive. And everyone knows there will be no peace, no balance point that will conclude hostilities. It is a spiral of chaos and “adjustments” that still continues to grow.

But if everyone’s occupied, many don’t participate with the required enthusiasm. It must be understood that throughout the new Europe, multiple channels of unified propaganda berate its citizens, accusing them of shoring up their own privileges and moldy values instead of taking up the cause of the new order. When all the significant decisions are made over their heads and against their interests, the democratic façade can no longer mask the asymmetric structure of the system. This is why the essential function of the rump states subservient to World Trade, Inc. is to infuse the *spirit of collaboration* into their subjects.

#### Tragicomic interlude

I learned that the criminal court of Paris fined some poor guy 750 Euros for having compared Sarkozy to Pétain. He wasn’t the first to notice this resemblance, however. Badiou wrote the same thing. And yes, it is clear, Sarkozyism is Pétainism, but—it has to adapt to the current situation—it’s Pétainism

wearing a thong, with rhinestones and peacock feathers on its ass. How can anyone be surprised? Once again we are participating in a grand show of public re-motivation, reconciliation with the occupier, identification with the aggressor, with a difference that can only ever be a citation, a remake, a B-movie version.

You could almost call it historic, when Lagarde, from the height of her podium, famously responded to the motto "France, the country that thinks" with "enough thought for now, let's roll up our sleeves!"<sup>40</sup> Never have they sunk so low in a parliament that has seen many lows. You have to go back to Vichy find the equivalent of this elegy to "the value of work", because it was obviously taken from a speech by Pétain on the May 1, 1941. Same plan, same development. Pétain began by saying: work is "the most dignified and noble means we have to become the masters of our fate." Lagarde echoes this sentiment: work is "a natural thing, essential for humanity to lead a life in equilibrium." But if work is so natural, why the devil is it necessary to defend and rehabilitate it? Is it not, by chance, to gloss over the impossibility of "becoming the master of your fate" under the Nazi boot? Or to "lead a balanced life" while the invisible hand has got you by the throat? Work is to blame for all humiliation, all resignation.

But enough already, we don't have any choice: it's exterior constraint, here world war, there globalization, making us roll up our sleeves. The enemy at our door is no longer

40 Speech by the minister of the economy on July 10, 2007 to the National Assembly introducing the draft bill in favor of work, jobs, and buying power.

the hordes of judeo-bolsheviks, but the “men and women of India and China” who “confront us armed with all the weight of their certitudes while we continue drifting along in our fantasies.” Competition is forced on us; we must agree to make sacrifices. But consent is not enough. We still have to do penance, affirming that our plight is just punishment for our mistakes. Because we have followed “bad shepherds,” or as the impeccably democratic Lagarde (twelfth most powerful woman in the world, according to Forbes) stated, ordinary people hold “aristocratic prejudices” against work, which might as well be against commerce, because in her mind the two amount to the same thing. The Right To Be Lazy, the Popular Front, paid vacations, May 1968, Henri Salvador and the 35-hour work week, these were stages on the path of decline. “It was wrong,” quavered Le Marechal (Pétain), “to have lured you with the image of a future city where there would only be time for leisure and pleasure.” And his lieutenant adds:

The last avatar of the right to be lazy was, during the 90s, the post-industrial myth of the end of work: that man could, according to this ultimate illusion, be definitively replaced by machines and computers.

In short, as the other says: the spirit of pleasure has destroyed what the spirit of sacrifice has built, despite the fact that this phrase seems odd coming out of the mouth of the sybarite parvenu of the Elysée (French presidential mansion). But in any case, unhappiness is good, because out of defeat comes a “rupture” and national recovery. Finally we arrive at the goal of all this bragging: to reheat the ran-

cid gruel of class collaboration. And among the phrases that follow, only the shrewdest could decipher which come from Pétain and which from the Minister of Commerce:

It is around the idea of work that the French people must reconcile. Let's stop opposing the rich and the poor as if society is irreparably divided into two classes. Indeed, common sense suggests, when it is not blinded by passion or illusion, that the basic interest of bosses, technicians and workers is in the success of their trade. In work relations, the strongest impart strength to the weakest. Everywhere where men of good faith, even those coming from very different social milieus, gather to discover a reasonable solution, misunderstandings dissipate and are replaced by understanding, then by esteem, then by friendship. Some people, of course, come together better than others. But, and this is the essential, nobody will lose. Henceforth, across social hierarchies, tightly knit teams will play together, in order to succeed together. And France will rediscover its equilibrium and harmony, which will allow it to recover more quickly.

Problem is, (responded a well-known 68er) property, management, and corporate profits in the capitalist system belong solely to capital. So those who do not have any find themselves in a state of alienation within the very work to which they contribute. No, from a human perspective, capitalism does not offer man a satisfactory solution.

It should be understood that this critique is partially

determined by circumstances: it's an excerpt from a televised address delivered by De Gaulle on June 7, 1968. Still, it makes you wonder, given the insipid mush served forty years later by his successors' policies. Today's veritable "rupture" should be measured by this yardstick. The collaborationist Kessler, who wants to "methodically defeat the program of the National Council of the Resistance" also bluntly admits that that which must be eliminated is not only May 1968, but its "founding fathers," sixty years of history, history itself, and with it the most basic ability to judge and to resist.

Since I'm citing these things and since Mrs. Lagarde claims to have read and even understood the "timeless work" *Democracy in America* that she evokes frequently in her apologue, let's remember the terms in which Tocqueville judged the liberal-democratic system that she wants us to love:

The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided: men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting: such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to be nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.

Enough thought. We are there.

*Pesky reflexivity*—Like all analogies, the one just made between asymmetrical conflict and the current state of the social ques-



tion clearly has its limits. For it isn't possible, at least among the citizens of the G8, to clearly distinguish between the occupied and the occupiers. It is useless to rail against "foreign influence" or "Americanization," a dynamic that is internal to all countries in global society. And it would be just as puerile to see a conspiracy of the Masters of the world in which the immense majority have no power. The days when the majority of workers were culturally, politically, and financially cut off from bourgeois activity are long gone. Today, there are thousands of ties that connect them. The average Joe can rage against speculation in the stock exchange; that's where his health insurance, his education, and his old age are financed (and it is he, small time investor, who will get fleeced with the first gust of wind). He rails against globalization, but flocks to big sales on stuff made by Asian slaves. He is a bit worried about the future of the planet but is even more so by the rising price of gas. And if by chance, he demonstrates, it is not to defend dignity or solidarity, but his purchasing power. All in all, living in a democracy with such a high rate of participation, don't the people have the government (and the opposition!) that they deserve? This is how each person is also occupying him/herself, of course as lowly foot soldiers, only obeying orders and destined for war, but an occupier all the same, against whom it is time to resist.

It is here that a well-known little treatise written more than five centuries ago reasserts its relevance today. I am referring to the *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, written by Étienne de la Boétie at the age of eighteen. There are those who claim

that this book was written by Montaigne, that to protect his identity he ascribed the authorship to his deceased friend, but no matter. The problem that *Discourse* poses is that of the *reflexivity* of all power relations. It can be put very simply:

A man isn't a king only because other men behave as subjects in his presence. But because these men believe, on the contrary, that they are subjects because he is king.<sup>41</sup>

La Boétie wonders "what misfortune" made it that so many have bowed to the yoke without having been constrained to by force of arms. In response to this striking enigma, he did not have a definitive response (which is to his great credit) but offered some points of explanation.

"The first reason for voluntary servitude is habit." As banal as it may seem, this statement is far from it. For nothing is more underestimated in current theories than the role of habits. Think about the old dualism of reason and instinct. To the question "why do we do something," one will generally answer: either we do it deliberately or instinctively. This leaves out the enormous range of everything that is done out of routine automatic reflexes that were certainly learned at some point but to which no further thought is given. And it is the same with social reproduction. How does a society achieve a relatively stable state? Some say: because it is governed by mechanical laws. Others say: because each person makes rational choices. There again, they ignore that what is largely and continuously reproduced is

41 In truth, this quote comes from a footnote in *Capital*. Alas, Marx will simply neglect this crucial point in his analysis of social reproduction.

blind routine. When a dictatorship takes over it provokes resistance precisely because it runs roughshod over habits. But once victorious, it becomes a *fait accompli*. A *fait* is not *accompli* until everyone thinks that it is irrevocable. An example? All of these security measures, surveillance, and identity checks, to which every individual is submitted (and submits to) in a single day without even noticing. Just a few years ago, they would have been regarded as inadmissible attacks on an individual's free will.

The second reason given by La Boétie is the mind-numbing distractions and amusements that any self-respecting tyrant generously offers to his people. As soon as they have games, the subjects serve their master, "as inanely as, but not as well as, little children learn to read with colorful images." This theme of the infantilization of subjects by power recurs up to today. De Tocqueville said of the democratic state that "it would resemble paternal power if, like it, its goal were to prepare men for adulthood. But it doesn't intend to do that, on the contrary, it wants to keep them irrevocably stuck in childhood; it wants its citizens to be pleased, provided that they think only of this pleasure." Adorno and Horkheimer said as much about the culture industry. One could object that this is an insult to children, who, provided that they are not "infantilized" by the inanities doled out to them, know how to play with much more discernment and inventiveness. In any case, this phenomenon is certainly intensified by the simultaneous collapse of popular and bourgeois cultures, which, without wanting to idealize them in themselves, still offered potential

points of resistance to this astounding tyranny of leisure that swallows up mental free time.

Next we come to the ideology of the common good and the use of warm feelings. “Before committing the worst crimes,” writes La Boétie, [today’s despots] “always begin with a few nice discourses on public welfare, the common good, and relief for the poor.” It is superfluous to cite recent examples to prove this since this method has lost none of its relevance today. Much to the contrary: it is fed by the supplanting of political reason and critical judgment that it still allows (celebrated as “the end of ideologies”). What do you say to the flood of humanitarianism, the tricklings of compassion, and the crocodile tears? But what has notably changed is that this approach no longer needs to be believed to be effective. The era of mass media has perfected the perverse displacement of the question of the dishonest vs. the truthful nature of a discourse to that of its more or less successful “communication.” Today’s voluntary slave delights in “decoding information,” judging how the lies are dressed up, weighing their chance of success. He imagines he is taking part in a well-informed discussion. On this La Boétie remarked: “We know well the formulations they use possess a subtle skill, but can one speak of finesse where there is such impudence?”

Last but not least we take into account the delegation of power. La Boétie affirms: only five or six people will directly enjoy privileges with the tyrant. But these six have six hundred who profit as a result of this relationship, and in turn these six hundred offer advantages and favors to six thousand,

etc. This is what, in politics, we would call a crony network and in commerce a profit-sharing scheme. At all levels of the pyramid (except at the top and the very bottom) every individual sits on an intermediate *echelon*, and if he has to obey the echelon above him, this does not stop him from commanding the one below him, one compensating other. This is certainly the most original point in the *Discourse* that illuminates an *objective interest* in obedience. It is of little importance that you love a tyrant or hate him if you get certain advantages, a position. In addition, it permits the slave to satisfy his domination drive in complete security because he is covered by the hierarchy. The more you descend the pyramid, the more modest the gains, and, as a result, the greater the temptation to take out your resentment on those below you. Milgram has shown that, placed in a situation of authority that relieves them of responsibility, two thirds of the subjects in a study readily became torturers, a result that every war demonstrates is accurate. In a more banal context, nobody is much interested in learning what crimes and injustices their investments or business deals aid in some far away country.

But if tyranny benefits so many, what reason is there to criticize tyranny? Wouldn't it be more reasonable to try to bring in those who are still excluded? First of all, it is because, according to La Boétie, this form of organization destroys all virtue and therefore undermines all of society.

Among the wicked, when they get together, it is no companionship but conspiracy. They don't love each

other, they fear each other. They are not friends but accomplices.

There again, great progress has been made since the Renaissance; egoism has been raised to the level of a universal system ever since. From then on the very idea of equality has become a synonym for totalitarianism and only the “jealous” and the “wards of the state” have the nerve to call for solidarity. But that is not all. Because, the *Discourse* continues, one’s interest in participating in the mechanisms of power are paid for by acute existential suffering. Where no society is possible, there is no individuality either.

What trouble, what martyrdom, good God! [...] Always having to be on the lookout, keeping your ear to the ground, to discern from where danger might come, to be on guard for pitfalls, to search for dangers among one’s rivals, to find the traitor. Smile at each person and mistrust everyone, have no open enemies nor sure friends, always offer a laugh when your heart is cold with fear; not to be able to be joyful, nor dare to be sad!

This portrait, one will admit, is not without its similarities to familiar characters today.

The elements presented to explain voluntary servitude are thus of a somewhat different nature. The first, habit, happens *spontaneously*, as it were. The gravity of the *fait accompli* makes it appear irreversible and even necessary. Beyond a certain threshold it is the very mass of voluntary slaves (supposing that there is such a thing, since there is no real way of knowing if this number

is actually very small) that will push others to adapt. The two phenomena that follow, festivalization and the ideology of the common Good, are themselves deliberately *provoked*. It should be noted that they would not be effective unless they responded to a predisposition (to have fun, to believe in good intentions) that is widely prevalent. A latent tendency is aroused. Finally, the last element is *structural*. Here it is the hierarchical organization itself that grants its co-opted participants an interest in their own enslavement. It is clear, however, that these factors are united, that they are interacting. For example, the pleasant creator of a mind-numbing video game acts out of habit (it is established), from ideology (you have to meet the demand) and also to maintain his position in the social hierarchy. We have to insist on this point: *The Discourse Of Voluntary Servitude* does not elude the existence of constraints, it even presupposes it, since of course, nobody voluntarily enters this game. And these constraints are omnipresent as threats, because confronting the system is not without danger, even if it is only the risk of falling from one's position on the ladder. As a result servitude is not "voluntary" in that it does not result from each individual's free choice. But it is also not simply the result of coercion alone. It is to La Boétie's merit to have exposed this ambivalent middle course. It's not enough to account for authority, but it illuminates the reasons for its perpetuation.

Here, two objections may be expected. A liberal would reject the existence of slavery in a democracy, and a leftist would deny that it is voluntary. The two would agree that it is ahistori-

cal to judge the present using a text from the Renaissance: the first would say we are no longer subject to the personal power of a tyrant, the second because such a dated text could not take into account the specific form of capitalist domination. The first objection concludes that current social relations are exempt from arbitrariness or usurpation. This requires faith in the old fable of the social contract and the *invisible handshake* that will always come to reinstate it. But who can still believe this? It is very doubtful that anyone would actually choose of their own will to live in their current conditions if these conditions were presented as one option among many. Anyway, we've heard it again and again; the market has its constraints. So the problem remains intact. Even if today tyranny is impersonal (even the great bad guy Bush had to quit at the end of his term), this only accentuates the element of reflexivity and makes even more enigmatic the obedience it engenders.

To the second objection, we can respond that World Trade, Inc. did not appear one fine day out of nowhere like a UFO. A long process of evolution created it, mutations allowed its growth, which was already gestating in the sixteenth century. In their general applicability, La Boétie's observations are still as relevant as the political maxims of Machiavelli (to which they are in some way the counterpoint). This does not prevent us from examining the specific drives through which the reflexivity of domination takes place today, quite the contrary; which is what I have attempted to lay out in the previous chapters. But the anti-capitalists have always had a problem



with voluntary servitude, suspecting those who assert it want to drown the concrete guilt of the exploiters in the psychological generality that “everyone is guilty.” Assuredly as impersonal as power is, it rules through the caprice of the *deciders* in business, politics, and media, and it is essential that we, as much as possible, not let them get away with their plundering, extortion, and depravity. Necessary but not enough. Because everyone knows that as soon as one tyrant is ousted, his clone has already taken his place. One is guillotined, ten more show up. Above all, in shrugging off this troublesome issue, protest movements are fatally ensnared by a double paradox. First, seeing servitude purely from the standpoint of coercion is to grant the latter fantastic powers that it doesn’t possess—it being well understood that if the majority of humanity were ultimately to believe that the Masters of the world had superpowers, then these Masters would enjoy yet one more power: that of making use of this very belief. We saw this earlier with “the market” and “advertising”: critics of the system have an unfortunate tendency to take these discourses at face value. Not only does this make it impossible for them to understand what is really happening, but above all they reinforce the impotence they purportedly seek to attack.

The other element of the paradox is this: when more or less ill-intentioned individuals insist that we do not act but are acted upon, driven by economic constraints, social origins, mass manipulation, personal makeup, the unconscious or genetic background (delete what does not apply) what are they

really trying to pull? If we are total victims or pawns of a determinism against which we can do nothing, the issue of our free will doesn't even need to be raised. Let's take it a little further: to deny the existence of voluntary servitude is to deny the possibility of freedom.

*Disengagement*—The appropriate method for waging an asymmetrical war has been known and successfully used for a long time. It was presented twenty-five centuries ago by Sun Tzu in *The Art of War*. Contrary to the Western understanding, the classic Chinese strategy seeks to avoid head-on clashes at all costs, the goal being to win without ever having engaged in combat. It is a method that favors sidestepping, circumvention, ruse, attentive passivity. The art is all in the neutralizing of your adversary's forces before he can even get them into the fray. You make him lose his composure, you drive him crazy, you push him to make mistakes so that he will already be beaten, collapsing internally at the moment he has to act. Once this invisible work of sapping his strength is complete, it will take almost nothing to make him lose his balance and to neutralize him for good, the ultimate goal being not to destroy him, but to dismantle his structures in order to seize his resources.

It would be of interest to imagine the potential applications of this strategy to asymmetrical class war. For example instead of exhausting ourselves gaining support, reconstituting a bloc, why not attempt to achieve an economy of maximal means, creating as it were *groups that follow the path of least resistance*? In a world where one lone guy can make 4.9 billion

Euros vanish in an instant, the sky's the limit. But it would be mistaken to conceive of such a struggle in the heroic form of an intensive guerilla strategy that, lacking a hammer, opts for pinpricks. The latter can certainly have a considerable psychological impact, but that's not the point. The Chinese method (adapted to contemporary conditions) relies primarily on two eminently discrete principles: make oneself *opaque*<sup>42</sup> and let the formidable machinery of World Trade, Inc. inexorably mire itself into the sands of demotivation. When confrontation is not possible, sidestep.

To succeed in dominating the adversary's troops' position without taking a position would represent an oblique relationship. In other words, through the absence of positioning, I control the positioning of the enemy.<sup>43</sup>

Chinese and Japanese martial arts are founded on the same principle. In Aikido, for example, only the kinetic energy of the attacker is called upon and turned against him. This has led me to advocate the development of a kind of mental aikido, instead of trying to create yet another theoretical arsenal or a dogmatic fortress, one limits oneself in this discipline to mastering the minimal holds needed to turn ideological power back onto itself. Or, according to the playful words of Marx, "to make petrified relations dance by playing them their own tune."

42 [The French reads: *se rendre soi-même insondable*.—Tr.]

43 François Jullien, *Le Détour et l'accès*, Paris, Grasset, 1995. [English edition: *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*. New York: Zone Books, 2000.]

All these self-defense techniques are applications of a key concept of Chinese philosophy, Taoist in particular: *wei wu wei*, action without action. Let's limit ourselves to banal, if not simplistic formulations: abstention, the suspension of action, and non-engagement are also ways of acting. In place of doing something at all costs, of scrambling, of rushing about in every direction, in certain situations it is quite preferable to pose the question: why do something rather than nothing? It is not simply a matter of making a virtue out of necessity in an unfavorable array of forces but in reversing an asymmetrical situation by occupying a completely different plane. This would be the possible philosophical meaning of de-motivation.

These comments shouldn't be seen as some sort of esoteric withdrawal from the questions raised earlier. They respond to a very real necessity of denouncing the new dominant model of activity; by this I mean the *project*. There is nothing more revealing of how our epoch relates to time than the excessive use of this word. To project is to cast out ahead of yourself. To multiply projects is to endlessly continue casting the fulfillment of the original intent out further in front of you. Once one burden is thrown off, another arrives to pay off, support, and begin again, the activity being reduced to challenging *attempts*, rough drafts, which are not necessarily *great ideas*, whose realization is always deferred. This permanent projection of activity into the future confers, onto the lived present, the dimension of a real virtuality of which "virtual reality" is only an epiphenomenon.

Chiapello and Boltanski named the "projective city" as

the generic social form of our epoch, a vision of the world and a normative system at the same time. In the new version of World Trade, Inc., they write, society only exists in the form of a series of networks. And over every network a constraint rules, a norm: the project. It is this that determines when a network should begin and end, dictates the terms of membership and the acceptable forms of relationships within it, and of course the terms and conditions of what goes on there. If the project appears to be neutral, it is because it is a *grammar* of activity. “Anything can attain the status of a project, including ventures hostile to capitalism.” But this neutrality is illusory because, as the sociologists warn, conceiving one’s own activity in these terms is already adapting a series of constraints and norms inherent to World Trade, Inc., into which it has all the room to slip in.<sup>44</sup> Be wary of grammar. In the terrific account she draws from her experience as a leading programmer, the Californian Ellen Ullman showed how her leftist past became the ideal point of entry for her digital slavery. It was in political groups that she learned to analyze the *system*, to define a *project*, to write a *program*, and above all to sacrifice her personal life to the *organization*.<sup>45</sup> And so one is tempted to shout to the multitude of activists of every kind: leave the network, cancel the project, become passivists!<sup>46</sup>

44 *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, op. cit.

45 Ellen Ullmann, *Close to the Machine*, San Francisco, 1997.

46 [Passivistes as opposed to pacifistes.—Tr.]

In 1958 André Breton and his friends, in one of their typical manifestos, attacked the “accredited butchers” of science. The object of their anger at the time was not only the nuclear bomb, but also the waste that “pollutes atmospheric and biological conditioning of the species in an unpredictable way.”<sup>47</sup> The surrealists were visionaries. Also regarding this, they wrote that

Revolutionary thought sees the essential terrain of its activity reduced to the margins to the point that it must return to its origins of revolt, and short of<sup>48</sup> a world that can only feed its own cancer, rediscover the unknown sources of passion.

What seems remarkable here to me is the formulation “*short of a world.*” It calls for nothing less than a complete reversal in the direction of revolutionary energies. For too long they have been exhausted in a race with the techno-industrial system to be the first to get above the existing social conditions. This race was over a long time ago. More precisely, it has always been deceptive, the social utopias having been the fuel of development that has taken us to where we are today, in the midst of the realized utopia of World Trade, Inc., this universal non-place. Today, faced with the occlusion of the future, the will to resist fate can only aim for the *deceleration* that Walter Benjamin had the

47 “Démâquez les physiciens, videz les laboratoires!,” a tract distributed (along with some punches) at the Sorbonne during a lecture given by Robert Oppenheimer.

48 [*en deçà de* means on this side of as in a street or a border, but also short of or below as in this theory falls short of reality. This appears to be a very nuanced usage. —Tr.]

prescience to point out. Struck by the attacks of the Parisian insurgents on the public clocks in 1830, he wrote:

Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake.

This perfect gesture doesn't have to be called "revolutionary" in order to make it happen. Haunted by the growing possibility of an irreversible catastrophe, most of our contemporaries, if they were asked, would agree that it is high time to pull the brakes. For that matter, this very urgency complacently spreads throughout the media. But there is a great distance between thought and deed. There are a lot of constraints and addictions standing between the two, not to mention a lagging fear of lack.

Georges Bataille reminds us in *The Accursed Share*: if the Aztecs immolated sacrificial victims, it was not out of cruelty, but because they had the firm conviction that these murders were necessary to keep the sun shining. If they stopped the sacrifices, they would be plunged into darkness; they were forced to go through with it whether or not the perpetrators found the act repugnant. Bataille suggests: "They were no less preoccupied with sacrifice than we are with work." And yet if in the eyes of the Aztecs the society of immolation had its *undeniable objective constraints*, it is because the ritual worked, that it was *effective*, and the proof was: the sun comes up every morning. Is it really any different for us today? What does the thousand-

mouthed where tell us if not that? The markets insist that you immolate your vital energies. Without this sacrifice, all social life would be impossible, and the proof is... every morning, it all starts anew.

Except, in contrast to the Aztec myth, this circularity is not static; it always demands more from individuals, who find themselves overextended, overwhelmed by the increase of demands to which they have to respond. More and more unsolvable conflicts appear over the course of existence. A way to escape them is to flee into addiction, cynicism, simulation, or self-destructive derealization. This decline is not fatal, and we can happily add that many are striving to avoid these behaviors more or less consciously, not with some heroic stance, but by subtle gestures of reappropriating their time. In a way, demotivation is the application of a law of physics that the donkey in our prologue has known for a long time: *inertia is also a force*.

Of course, given the rapid velocity of the World Trade, Inc. train, ever increasing with the help of new locomotives, it is unlikely that a smooth, voluntary, emergency stop is going to happen in the foreseeable future. In this regard, as François Fourquet stated “The moral precepts of self-restraint and joyful sobriety at first glance appear to be magical incantations.”<sup>49</sup> But as we have seen, demotivation can be found in the very heart of this self-devouring system. So we can rely on its exemplary virtue, as long as it becomes aware of itself. And since it is indeed a wager, we call on Blaise Pascal to the rescue:

49 “L’idéal historique de décroissance” *Revue du MAUSS*, August 2007.



When everything is moving together, nothing seems to be moving, like on a ship. When everything is coming undone, nothing seems to be. The one who stops makes the behaviors of others known, acting as a fixed point of reference.

Searching out this *fixed point* is still the healthiest task the mind can undertake.

Today the managers want nothing less than to make every employee a situationist, enjoining them to be spontaneous, creative, autonomous, freewheeling, unattached, and greeting the precariousness of their lives with open arms. Trying to outdo this would be absurd.

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